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Simple Joys 2

Healing Words

by
PIYA TAN

Edited by
RATNA LIM EI GEIK

THE MINDING CENTRE
Singapore

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The Minding Centre, based in Singapore, is part of Piya Tan's Dharma ministry. It was founded in 2006 to provide Dharma-based non-religious service to those in need of counsel and solace. It also serves as a haven and hub for those seeking Dharma by way of meditation and education, Sutta study and translation, and spiritual experience. The Centre also supports and promotes Piya Tan in his full-time Buddhist and related work.

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The Sutta Discovery Series is part of the Living Word of the Buddha project which aspires to encourage and facilitate Buddhist Studies, both in a Dharma-inspired and academic manner for personal development as well as outreach work on a local and global scale. The Minding Centre and the Living Word of the Buddha project are motivated and guided by the vision of mere Buddhism.

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The mere Buddhist vision. We aspire to learn, teach and practise mere Dharma, or "non-religious Buddhism," that is, Buddhism as simple as possible, as the Buddha Dharma, so that it is open to all who seek true stillness and liberating wisdom. We aspire to compassionately and joyfully proclaim the possibility, necessity and urgency of gaining spiritual liberation in this life itself—at least as a streamwinner, with or without dhyana—in keeping with the Okkanti Saṁyutta (S 25). ***Mere Buddhism is easy: live it and be free***

CONVENTIONS

The following conventions are used in this book:

SD n.x *Sutta Discovery* by Piya Tan, where n denotes volume number and x is the chapter number.
See online: http://dharmafarer.org

Basic abbreviations

D	Dīgha,nikāya	Long Discourses
M	Majjhima,nikāya	Middle Length Discourse
S	Saṁyutta,nikāya	Connected Discourses
A	Aṅg'uttara,nikāya	Numerical Discourse

General abbreviations

J	Jātaka
J or JA	Jātaka Commentary
Kh	Khuddaka,pāṭha
Dh	Dhammapada
DhA	Dhammapada Commentary
U	Udāna
It	Iti,vuttaka
Sn	Sutta,nipāta
Tha	Thera,gāthā
ThaA	Thera,gāthā Commentary
Thi	Therī,gāthā
ThīA	Therī,gāthā Commentary
Vism	Visuddhi,magga

FOREWORD

This is a book of readings for *thinking* people, for those who value self-understanding. We might see this as self-help servings of healing words from early Buddhist recipes for emotional health, a full life and spiritual liberation.

This anthology records my weekly reflections written from September 2009 to May 2011, in response to some current affairs or while reflecting on uplifting moments of being joyfully touched by the Buddha's teachings, that is, by life's simple and true realities.

If you read between the lines, you would see that this is a record of your own feelings and joys that I have been privileged to notice, and which I have crafted together in the light of the Buddha's teachings. You might at once see yourself in these writings; or, you might feel drawn to the feelings expressed here. You might even smile at what you are reading. And perhaps, you might lose yourself in deep joy in these healing words. This is why I have written these.

Buddhism, especially early Buddhism, is a teaching of simple yet profound joy and wisdom. We need some joy to really function effectively in our daily lives. We need some joy to jumpstart our meditations. And the wisdom that such activities bring forth only deepens and broadens that joy, so that we want to share it with others.

Yet, to be truly happy, we must learn to have moments of inner bliss, looking deeply at ourselves. This is a joyful way of telling ourselves that there is so much undiscovered and untouched goodness in us that continue to surprise us as we discover and touch the goodness in others.

In an important way, this book encourages us to take a few more steps, maybe even a leap, further ahead in our journey of self-understanding and freeing of the heart. We might even inspire a better Buddhist community.

As before, we are indebted to **Ratna Lim**, my unconditionally compassionate wife, for her devoted efforts in putting this volume together. She is that special person who never fails to see goodness in me even when I am sometimes uncertain of my own abilities. She is my first lively audience, who wants to share these healing words with you, just as much as I do, maybe even more.

Vivy Suhendra has patiently and carefully read the proofs, which makes reading this book more enjoyably beneficial. She has an amazing memory that links up what she reads, and also a beautiful command of English. It's hard for a writer to see all his typos, but Vivy has made this book more pleasant to read.

Veron Lien, a designer of natural talent, has given us another spaciously beautiful cover for this volume. She has put together three basic colours in a frozen movement, representing unfinished action, just as we are all on-going learners, seeking awakening. Yet the simple but powerful imagery evokes a sense of eternity, like the Dharma. We thank her for this gift of beauty and truth that naturally reflects the purpose of this book.

Marcus Kam deserves a special mention for being a very warm and caring friend who has introduced many to our work of Dharma. He is an excellent example of a humble active Buddhist who works without fanfare. Yet he is one who is very clear about his directions, no matter where he is. He is a gentle reminder that spiritual friendship is alive and well.

This Dharma gift has been made possible, as before, by your kind generosity. Its presence is a celebration of your own inspiration in

the Buddha's teaching. Now is the time to share this healthy joy with all our friends and those who would be friends, or with anyone who care for the true happiness of self-understanding. We cannot afford to be hesitant in sharing the Dharma: a moment of kindness may change a life forever.

Please freely pass on these healing words of the Dharma. There is a lot more from where it comes. Let us make it a life-changing Buddhist experience.

May our words heal, and move others to heal more.

Āsāḷha Pūjā Day
15 July 2011

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

PIYA TAN (1949-?2030)

Piya Tan, a former **Theravada monk** of 20 years, is working on an annotated translation of the early Pali Suttas, harmonizing between the historical critical method and Dharma-moved inspiration, and teaching them. Piya specializes in early Buddhism and its application today. His Sutta translations (the Sutta Discovery series) are especially popular with both forest monastics and academics.

In the 1980s, working closely with Dr Ang Beng Choo, project director of the Buddhist Studies Team (BUDS), Piya was consultant and regular lecturer. BUDS successfully introduced **Buddhist Studies in Singapore Secondary Schools**.

After that, he was invited by Prof Lewis Lancaster as a visiting scholar to **the University of California at Berkeley, USA**. He has written a number of educational books on Buddhism (such as *Total Buddhist Work*) and social surveys (such as *Buddhist Currents* and *Charisma in Buddhism*).

As **a full-time Dharma teacher,** he runs regular Sutta and Dharma classes at various temples, centres and tertiary Buddhist societies. He practises Buddhist counseling therapy using a combination of Forest-Insight meditation and Sutta-based psychology.

Piya often writes critically, in an increasingly mystical (that is, experiential) tone, on contemporary Buddhist-related issues, and often speaks out against the misinformation and abuse of Buddhism. He sees Buddhism as a life-affirming path to spiritual awakening, and has full faith in gaining streamwinning in this life itself, and urges others to aspire to this, too.

He enjoys mentoring young adults, inspiring them towards full-time lay Buddhist work. In his free time, he loves teaching his children and Ratna to think critically and enjoy the wonders of literature and nature.

For more information see Wiki Piya:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piya_Tan

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FOR MAKING THIS POSSIBLE, THANKS!

The Minding Centre (TMC) is an act of faith. The TMC is a witness to the living truth of the Buddha Dharma.

We have neither sizeable nor regular source of income, but rely fully on your own faith and support. We are never sure when our next donation or cheque will come, or how much it is going to be, but we know it will come.

We set up the TMC because

(1) we have firm faith in the authenticity and spirituality of the Dharma;

(2) we are convinced that a good understanding of the Suttas will clear wrong views and practices;

(3) we can rely on the locals to be truly good and self-reliant Buddhists;

(4) we know that exemplary lay followers will inspire monastics to keep to their training and rules, and become even better teachers for the benefit of all.

Above all, we are committed to the vision that we can attain spiritual liberation in this life itself by gaining at least streamwinning. The Suttas are very clear about this (see Saṁyutta ch 25).[1]

In our quest for spiritual wisdom and liberation, we need to make some sacrifices. Rents and maintenance have to be paid for. Sometimes the cost can be quite high, so it seems. But nothing can measure up to the Dharma: how much is the Dharma worth in dollars?

[1] For details, see S 25.1 = SD 16.7; S 25.5 see SD 17.3 (4.5.1); S 25.6, see SD 17.4 (10).

For making this possible, thanks!

We need more than money to run efforts like the TMC: we need faith. Otherwise, it is just a successful business.

The Dharma is immeasurable. We remind ourselves of this in our lovingkindness meditation. Lovingkindness is unconditional love for all beings, including ourselves, in terms of spiritual development.

If your heart is truly in the Dharma, you will have no fear. Help and compassion are always around the corner.

If your heart is in the Dharma, you will have a vision of wondrous things to come.

We thank you for your Dharma-moved pledges. With a few more regular (monthly, quarterly, even annual) pledgers, we will be able to cover at least our monthly rental.

More importantly, do join us for the Sutta experience whenever you can, and tell others about this wonderful opportunity at the TMC.

Even if you make no pledge or have not donated, you are more than welcome—to join in the Sutta study. For your presence is proof of your faith in the Dharma.

May we remember and support local Dharma efforts for the local presence of the Buddha Dharma for the benefit of all.

Let us be the roots and shoots from which a beautiful Bodhi tree will grow in Singapore in due course.

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1 From Born Again to Never Again

Early this month (Aug 2009), Dr Jake Mitra of Perth, Australia, sent me three best-selling books by Bart D Ehrman, the James A Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina, USA. Ehrman is renowned for his contributions to the field of religious studies, focussing on New Testament interpretation and the history of ancient Christianity. In short, he is a leading expert in the Bible, especially the New Testament (in Greek).

But, by his own admission, his 30 years of born-again evangelism and Bible research led him to renounce Christianity and call himself a "happy agnostic" (2005:247). We begin to understand his life-change when we read his book, "God's Problem: How the Bible Fails to Answer Our Most Important Question — Why We Suffer" (2008). This is a serious book where Ehrman turns from his usual historical-critical concerns to theological consideration of the problem of suffering: namely, if God is all-powerful and all-loving, how can suffering exist?[2]

His "Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why" (2005) shows that the Bible, far from being a divinely perfect book, is full of evidence of human fallibility and ecclesiastical politics. Though himself trained in evangelical literalism, Ehrman confesses that his earlier faith in the inerrant inspiration of the Bible is misguided, given that the original texts have disappeared, and that the extant texts do not agree with one another.

In "Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible (And Why We Don't Know About Them)" (2009), Ehrman reveals not only that the Bible is full of inconsistencies and outright

[2] In April 2008, he was interviewed over this book in Berkeley: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trt1ZWR5PqQ

forgeries (many of the books attributed to the apostles were written by others living decades later), but that many fundamental stories and doctrines were later inventions by people trying to make sense of a disconnected collection of texts. The well known story of the woman caught in adultery (John 7:53-8:12), for example, was not originally in the Bible (2005:63-65).[3]

In the first two books, Ehrman writes passionately about theodicy, that is, a theological attempt to explain or justify suffering in the world. Informed Buddhists would identify such an experience as *samvega* (a sort of religious shock that causes Siddhartha, the future Buddha, to renounce the world).[4] This problem, says Ehrman, involves three assertions that all appear to be true, but if so, appear to contradict one another. The three assertions are:

God is all powerful.
God is all loving.
There is suffering.

Theologians accept the first two assertions, but want to deny the third. Ehrman says that "my goal is to help people think about suffering" (2008:18). No matter how well off, well educated, or well cared for, he says, "even we can experience professional disappointment, unexpected unemployment and loss of income, the death of a child, failed health; we can get cancer, or heart disease, or AIDS; all of us will eventually suffer and die." (2008:18)

Using internal biblical evidence, Ehrman shows how the Bible tries to explain suffering. One way, for example, is that God punishes his people for sinning (disobeying) Him (2008:27); another is that God tests them to see if they still have faith despite His making them suffer (2008:164-172).

[3] For Piya Tan's article, see http://pali.house.googlepages.com-/Sinstonessuffering.pdf.

[4] See Somanassa Sutta (It 2.1.10), SD 16.14.

Reading Ehrman is very exciting, as it gives me a sense of déjà vu because of my own translating and study of the early Buddhist texts for most of my adult life. There are two possible paths to take when we become more intimately familiar with the scriptures. We could reinterpret it while keeping silent on the scriptural difficulties, or we could be honest and talk about them. Most of us, I'm sure, would benefit more from the latter.

In some ways, the Buddhist scriptures, especially the early Indian Buddhist texts, are not accessible to every Buddhist. Academic and Buddhist specialists may know such texts well enough, but most Buddhists cannot even remember a sutta title or reference, and tend to quote their favourite speaker rather than the Buddha. But this is beginning to change as we get better English translations of the early texts.

If a single volume like the Bible is rigged with various historical, literary and religious difficulties, what more can we say about the early Pali Canon, which is said to be about 11 times more voluminous, and the Mahāyāna texts, which are very much larger? The Mahāyāna texts were written centuries after the Buddha, both in and outside India.

Much of the Mahāyāna texts deviate from the early Indian teachings. So diverse are their differences, both in text and tradition, that it is easier to regard the various Buddhist sects as separate "Buddhisms" (or operating systems) unto themselves. It would be useful and interesting to compare such later developments (whether they are in Pali, Sanskrit, Chinese or Tibetan) with the earliest strata of the Buddha's teachings, and to study them in a historical and critical manner to understand how and why they arose.

One great advantage of Buddhism is that, unlike Christianity which is book-based, it is truth-based. This truth is best discovered by way of a contemplative tradition that goes right back to the Buddha's

time. The inner stillness of Buddhist meditation is the best touchstone we have to authenticate any Buddhist teaching worth its salt. Buddhists may talk about texts, but they know the true answer lies in the still clarity of their minds, the true basis for outer goodness.

2 As if

Let us stop and examine our lives for a moment. What can we really know about ourselves? We know that we are experiencing something. We are reading (seeing) this passage. We can hear some sounds from not too far away. We might smell toast burning, or hear the kettle whistling. Or, we might feel the cold or the heat. Thus far we can usually be quite sure of things.

But when a thought comes to our minds, it often leads to a thousand other thoughts: this is called mental proliferation. Whenever we think or imagine or fantasize in this way, we are either delving into the past, or projecting into the future. In either case, none of the thoughts are real: they are not the present moment. They are "as if …"

In fact, other than our immediate physical sense-experiences that we are directly aware of, we generally live in a self-made or projected world of "as if." Take a common example of knowing someone: we think we know this person so well, but then something this person has said or done simply shocks or disillusions us, making us realize that we have misperceived him or her.

Our level of shock or disappointment is proportional to the confidence or faith in our perception of that person. The point is that we can never be sure. We tend to have a permanent or fixed view of people. If we *think* someone is bad, he is forever bad; he cannot change. If we *think* someone is good, we are likely to take him to be more than what he really is. We perceive an "as if" image of him.

The same works for ourselves. We tend to have a certain self-view. Self-views limit and imprison us. A self-view is like a photo of a free flying bird suddenly frozen into pixels of colours, or a series of "moving" images. (There is really nothing moving in a "movie.") No matter how beautiful the picture or movie is, it is *not* the bird. No matter how beautiful a picture of a sunset may be, it is still not the sunset. The picture is not the thing. We are not a self-view.

Our ideas limit us when we do not know how to let go of them. But they liberate us when we are able to understand things better. Ideas are tools to help us think better; they are not permanent things to cling to. A mind burdened with fixed ideas and opinions will be crushed under its own dead weight.

Now let us apply this "as if" framework to religion, one of the most speculative areas of human life. If we are religious, we are often likely to believe in what we can neither see nor experience directly with our senses. The key ideas of religion—such as God, soul, devil, ghost—can only be "known" within our minds. At best, we can only *claim* to have seen any of them, or say that someone claims to know about them. But none of us can be too sure about any of this.

Now let us develop this idea further in a positive way. Remember when we were kids, we played "as if" games, and remember how happy we were then. In a sense, as long as we are unawakened, we are still spiritually children. So, what if we go on playing the "as if" game, but on a more mature level: the results would be most enlightening.

Most people who do not care about religion tend to think that this is our only life. As such, they argue, we might as well gather rose-buds while we may. Eat, drink and be merry: for, today we live, tomorrow we die.

But I think such a life-view is likely to unleash our shadows, the elements of our dark side. Such people might then feel the urgency

to enjoy life ("find happiness") to the maximum right now at any cost. So we have priests who vowed poverty but earn $18,000 a month (priests with money are likely to enjoy what non-priests would),[5] and lawyers who ran away with their client's millions—to give two well known examples in Singapore today.

What such materialists (a technical name for such make-the-best-of-this-one-life believers) may not realize is that life is actually much shorter than that! Life is really just a **moment**. By the time I have completed this reflection, I am a very different person. Of course, this is not very noticeable, because my mind will then be occupied with other pressing matters.

But just sit back for a while, and look back to when you were much younger (say 10 years ago, or even just before reading this reflection). You have a certain life-view or opinion, but now you have changed that view. In fact, we create and revise our views more often than we realize. But a powerful voice in our heads keeps dictating to us that only a certain view is right. This is the voice of the past.

What does all this mean to me? As I have said at the beginning: we live in an "as if" world. However, unlike the materialists, I am not sure if this is my one and only life. Whenever I look at the trees and nature I am reminded that life is a cycle, an endlessly turning wheel. Plants produce seeds, from which new plants grow.

Suppose my actions are like seeds (like seeds producing like plants). Then, my actions will bear fruits; my actions have consequences which I will feel for myself, sooner or later. If seeds can produce

[5] See Mani,culaka Sutta (S 42.10.8) = SD 4.21 & "Money and Monastics" = SD 4.19-23.

plants, surely a conscious being like me would continue to generate myself.[6]

For, I am not just body, but I am also mind. In fact, it is my mind that has thought out this reflection and made my body (the fingers) type it out. Surely, the mind is powerful enough to survive this body, which has a limited shelf-life. This is called rebirth in Buddhism.

I prefer this "as if" life-view rather than the "one and only life" view because I think that a life guided by karma and rebirth is more likely to explain why it is better to be good than to be evil. We can then see that our lives are made up of actions and their consequences.

I don't think the last word on such a reflection is mine to say, as you have your own life. All I can say now is: keep reflecting on this, and let your still clear mind speak to you. I think you will in time hear the same voice I hear, which says:

"This mortal life is but an intermediate state of consciousness."[7]

3 How to Address a Dharma Teacher

My students are often at a loss on how to address me. Some address me as "Dr …" because I was invited for a stint as a Visiting Scholar to the University of California at Berkeley. My Thai students call me "Ajahn" (like "Shifu" in Chinese, both meaning "Teacher"). Most of my local students address me as "Teacher Piya," which is quaint but warm.

[6] Here is an interesting recent report on rebirth recollection: http://-www.youtube.com/watch?v=72oCyrbgN_I.

[7] Brahma,vihara Sutta, A 10.208.2 = SD 2.10.

Frankly, I am quite happy to be addressed simply as "Piya." This way I know at once I am being addressed. When I feel ego-deprived, I remind myself that in Myanmar, "Piya" is quite an honourable title.[8]

Some of my students and Buddhist executives have also remarked that I should spruce up the way I dress. Being better dressed attracts a bigger audience, I agree. Still I want to dress comfortably rather than for show, even if I may not attract a large audience. I would be quite disappointed if people came to listen to my clothes rather than to Dharma teachings.

There is a more important reason why I dress simply and comfortably. The monastics of old dressed very simply, often in rag-robes. These robes were simply random patches (including patches from a shroud) that were stitched together and then dyed in an even natural colour.

It was not a uniform; for, many other non-Buddhist ascetics, too, dressed in the same way. In fact, they all looked somewhat alike. It was much later in the Buddha's ministry, probably after the first 20 years or maybe later, that Ānanda, at the Buddha's instruction, it is said, designed the simple Theravada robe with paddy-field patterns.

The fact that the early monastic robes are not a uniform is often missed today. Some modern monastics wear rather fancy robes. In Japan recently, the priests (clerics who are non-celibate) even had a fashion show, walking the runway showing off different types of colourful robes, to bring more Buddhist awareness to the public, as temple popularity seems to be rapidly declining there.

[8] I'm not against anyone who is comfortable addressing a monastic or a teacher by title. My point is that we need to remind ourselves of what good we can glean from these teachers rather than merely admiring or worshipping them.

Those who are attracted to monastics because of their uniform (nice robes) probably like the feeling of power or status. That is the reason why the army is famously uniformed. Power often invokes fear and obedience. Understandably, those Buddhists who place a premium on uniform (magnificent attire and paraphernalia) attract and control the bodies and minds of those who are more faith-inclined. This is sometimes known as psychological dependence and counter-dependence.

Such a situation also suggests a feeling of low self-esteem, so that we need to impress others or win their approval. I don't think people remember someone like Gandhi for dressing style, but for his thoughts and work.

A lay guru who wants the profits of both worlds (eg, the secular and the monastic) might keep long hair.[9] The long hair of the gurus is like the full beard of polygamous tribal leaders, or like the mane of a mature lion, king of the beasts. It is an expression of male dominance and predation, from which glassy-eyed females best keep away (but they often don't, and let themselves be irresistibly drawn like moths into a flame).

Monastics shave off their hair, as an important symbolic gesture, to renounce sexuality in all forms. As such, a monastic involved in sex of any kind is a contradiction in terms, and even a single sex act is enough to automatically deprive him/her of monastic status.

If we think that a monastic is "holy" and worthy of our adoration simply because he is robed, then we are fetishist (treating people as objects). This explains why we are often plagued with "false monastics" collecting cash donations publicly. These false "false monastics" are not the real problem; they are only a symptom of

[9] I'm not against long hair. The context here is the misuse of symbols to attract and distract others.

the real problem: the true "false monastics," the Tartuffes with four- or five-digit salaries, credit cards, cars, expensive tastes, etc.[10]

Of course, we should not judge such people, "because they are also doing good works"; but who is saying this? Could two, or a hundred good deeds cancel a bad one? Karma does not work numerically; it works by habit and exponentially.

My point is that a Dharma teacher should not entice or distract his/her students and audience with external and worldly symbols, and statistics (not too much, anyway). If we are attracted to a Buddhist teacher merely because of a "PhD" or title or status or skin colour or great following,[11] then we are probably intellectually, socially, or psychologically challenged.[12]

External symbols may promise power, popularity and plenty, but that's what they are: merely promises. A bad teacher wants you to admire him and never question him. A Dharma teacher tells you to close your eyes, look carefully within, and discover the true spiritual power, wisdom, compassion, and peace, within yourself.

4 Compassion or Gratitude?

One of the most memorable counseling cases I have carried out concerned a young girl, Mei (not her real name), freshly graduated from teacher's college in the 1970s when I was still a monk.

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[10] False "false monastics" & true "false monastics": see *Simple Joys*, 2009, ch 14.2.

[11] Again, a caveat: I am not against good teachers with such qualities. They should not be used to exploit others.

[12] If you feel a bit upset reading this, try this spiritual exercise: sit calmly and ask yourself: "*Why* do I like this teacher?" Let the answer arise by itself, and then ask *why* again, and so on. In the end, if you are open, you see yourself with better self-understanding.

Mei began by asking me if she should support her mother who had neither loved nor supported her. Mei had begun working as a teacher, and wondered if her mother had a change of heart because she was merely eyeing Mei's money.

In the past, said Mei, her mother did not support her in any way, saying that as a Chinese girl, she would marry and bear someone else's surname, and be no more part of her mother's family, and so on. So Mei had to give tuition, and work her way through college.

After she had finished telling all that she felt like saying, I began to counsel her in a Dharma-inspired manner.

Firstly, I told her, the fact that she bothered to talk about this matter showed that the whole affair, especially her rejecting her mother, troubled her. She had compassion deep inside her.

Secondly, her mother might not really be at fault, even if she told Mei that being a girl she was useless to her and the family. This was probably due to negative cultural conditioning of her mother. She was probably mindlessly transferring her own sad past upon Mei. Moreover, they were a very poor family then. She had no father, either.

Thirdly, Mei now had a choice. She could rightly reject her mother and not support her in any way. For, since her mother had neither loved nor supported her, there was basically nothing that Mei needed to reciprocate her (except for giving birth to her).

In other words, there was almost nothing that Mei should be grateful for towards her mother. Mei had been rejected by her, had supported herself ever since, and had been a good person despite her mother's rejection. Despite this, Mei only felt sadness, not even blaming her mother for giving birth to her.

However, as a Buddhist, we need to be compassionate, too. To be compassionate is to be kind to someone *even* when she or he does

not deserve it, or *especially* when the recipient does not deserve it. We do not deserve the Buddha's compassion, and yet his teachings are for our benefit. The Buddha keeps no secret of his teachings.

Then, there is the matter of karma. Perhaps, Mei's mother's inability to love her, and Mei herself suffering the rejection, were both the fruits of some common past karma. The attending social reality was that her family was too poor to support Mei in the past.

Mei had every right, as it were, to now reject her unloving mother. But then, Mei would only be perpetuating what her mother had done, and maybe what her own grandmother had done to her mother before that. Mei would then be fuelling the samsaric rejection cycle down to her own daughter and beyond.

Yet, the pain could end here. That is, if Mei told her mother that she (Mei) understood her mother's situation (cultural conditioning, poverty, etc), and forgave her as she was still her mother, despite everything. The point is that Mei was now in the best position to help her own mother, and herself, too.

The rejection cycle could end right there—if Mei wanted it. She had the power to break the cycle with her compassion.

She broke down and cried. Then she looked relieved and happy that she now saw the meaning behind all her and her mother's sufferings. The lesson of it all was not to reject loved ones even in the greatest of difficulties, but to see one another's potential goodness.

Here, we are confronted with the significance of two important Buddhist virtues: gratitude and compassion. What are they and how are they different? **Gratitude** is our reciprocal (or returning) kindness to those who have been kind to us because they *deserve* that kindness.

In Buddhism, a grateful person is said to be *kataññū,katavedī,* "one who acknowledges and rejoices in what is done." *Kataññū* means

"knowing what had been done," that is, acknowledging the good done for our benefit. *Kata,vedī* means rejoicing in that action, that is, being joyful in the goodness of others (which is also called *muditā, appreciative joy*). This way, both the giver and the receiver gain in goodness.

Compassion is our effort to show kindness fully and effectively to others, whether or not they deserve it. Compassion is especially potent when it is motivated by **wisdom**. For, it is a kind of giving that sees potential goodness in others; that is, the other party could likewise benefit others. It builds up and enriches the common good and wisdom.

Deep inside, we are all responsible for suffering and goodness, whether in ourselves or in others. That is, if we understand that they both arise from conditions (a network of causes, not just one). If we understand such conditions, we will be able to reduce and stop suffering, and cultivate and promote goodness. This is called right effort, that is, acting with right view.

5 Religion Can Be Bipolar

Humans are sometimes defined as tool-using animals. Our evolving minds teach us how to use tools, at first a simple stone to break or cut something, and then fire, and then the wheel, and now the computer and the Hubble telescope, and so on. We invent tools, use them, and discover new things.

One of our enduring inventions is religion. We started off trying to understand why our colleagues change like the decaying bark of a tree, and then stop moving like a rock. We learned that we die. Then we noticed that plants, too, die, but they lived again when we planted their seeds. There must be something that survived death: man invented the soul.

But who "really" made the soul? This took a bit longer to understand. We noticed the whims of the weather, and changes in climate, the power of lightning and the natural elements. We felt overwhelmed by the sky, the rivers and the mountains. These things were very much bigger than us. We decided that they were gods. They must have made the soul, too.

Of course, we do not really know how our ideas about soul and God arose. They evolved over millennia. The idea of a single all-powerful God understandably evolved as man found safety in numbers and became more tribal. As the tribe became bigger and more diverse, the many gods, spirits and demons only added to the difficulty of crowd control and public safety (to put it simply).

As tribes evolved into nations, the many gods, too, were nationalized. The innumerable cells and tissues that were spirits, demons and gods, slowly scaffolded to form organs of more complex functions, and then into a supreme being, God. One nation under God is likely to be more powerful than divisive tribes with many gods.

Those with the genius of defining God became priests, and those who made use of such definitions to their advantages were the kings, emperors and politicians. And in between them, there were a range of uses and abuses of the God-idea.

The process of defining God is still going on today, as religious groups mushroom with their self-defined God and compete for members and resources. Such a centralized system cannot tolerate deviance or dissidence, because if the centre falls apart, the whole system collapses. That is why God-systems can never be tolerant.

Despite great advances in religion, science and civilization, we are still animals deep down inside. Wild beasts still lurk in the shadows of our unconscious. The Buddhist texts call them "latent tendencies," comprising of greed (pleasure instinct), revulsion (death in-

stinct) and ignorance (the shadow). We veritably turn into beasts when we are taken over by lust, by hate, or by ignorance.

And yet, we have the ability to know what we are doing: we have reflexive consciousness. That is, we are aware that we are aware. With this reflexive awareness, we can notice what causes pain, how to avoid pain, how to satisfy needs, and most importantly, how to relate causes rightly to effects, to question, to discover, to be happy.

If we fail in these things, we are hardly human (yet), even if we have a human body. Our bodies have evolved but not our minds. Our prehistoric ancestors learned how to save themselves from dangerous animals, for example, either by running back to the safety of their populated caves, or by climbing up a tree.

But our intelligent ancestors did not (fortunately) think in an either-or way to escape danger. It was not either the cave or the tree. What if the cave was too far away, or there were no trees high enough for safety? They learned that they had a wide range of possible methods to achieve safety from all kinds of danger: they could use a strong broken tree branch as a spear, or hide downwind, and so on. Otherwise, we would not be here today.

Having said that, I must say that I am sadly amused whenever a self-righteous bi-polar God-believer challenges others to choose between us or them, either God or damnation, eternal heaven or eternal hell-fire. On a light side, if this kind of heaven exists, it would be populated by profoundly boring bipolar self-righteous one-tracked non-thinkers (who, by the way, swear by the same God, and at each other, too). Surely, most people would rather be in a hell of like-minded free-thinking seekers with different perspectives of life.

The Buddhist view is that whatever exists, by definition, must exist in time: it is impermanent. If something does not exist in time, it is meaningless. There is nothing to talk about. We cannot define something into existence. If we do, then we are delusional.

The Buddha, in his first sermon, admonishes us against two extremes of belief: that of eternal life and that this is our one and only life. The eternalist view is the basis for the God idea, the either-or dualism, the eternal heaven or eternal hell threats. All such ideas can never be real because all existence is impermanent.

The other extreme—this is our only life, so make the best of it—is also false, and can be a basis for self-centred materialism: eat, drink, and do our darndest, thinking we won't get caught. Those Singaporean lawyers who absconded with their clients' millions and the financial manipulators who crashed world markets are likely to hold such an idea.

If we are to awaken to true liberating reality, we need to rise above these two extremes, these bipolar ways of thinking. The answer lies in self-understanding, that we live in an intimately interconnected world—we are both innerbeings as well as interbeings. We need to relate to one another even more from the inside, from our hearts.

6 Do We Really Know What We Are Saying?

When we have done something wrong or think we have done something wrong, we often either apologize or tell a lie about it (or try to divert attention from it). Actually, there is another way out without being apologetic nor lying. Two real-life stories will illustrate the consequences of such an approach, the wisdom of which I leave to you.

The first story I will call "The Flapjack." Once, decades back, when I was living with a Buddhist community in the UK, I tried to make some flapjacks for the community. The recipe called for flour and honey, both of which had run out. So I resorted to the closest ingredients that were available: oats and molasses.

Having put together all the ingredients, I mixed them well. Then taking a ladle-full I poured it onto a hot frying pan. When the "flap-jack" was done I tried it. When I bit it, to my horror, the perception, "Rock cake!" arose in me. It was as hard as a rock! I thought no one would eat such a teeth-cracking disaster.

But I was not one to waste food. Or, rather, at that time, a part of me was wondering how to hide my embarrassing mistake. In between the mental jabbering, I decided to pour the rest of the mixture into a large baking pan, and bake it in the oven for all it's worth.

When the oven timer rang, I carefully took out the "flapjack" to check it. Placing the pan on the table, I examined it like a surgeon remorsefully looking at his dead patient. It was as hard as a rock. There was no dustbin big enough to hold it. I could not break it into pieces, anyway. So if you can't solve a problem, just leave it at the table! Then I went to bed to forget about the whole unpalatable incident.

The next morning when I came into the kitchen, I was greeted with a grateful voice:

"That was really good stuff you made, Piya! What is it called?"

I looked at the pan: it was as empty as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, except for a few tiny crumbs.

"Is it a kind of national cookie?" the voice continued.

"Oh…," I replied, almost intuitively, "It's called Singapore Rock Cake!"

"Do make some more some time, OK," the voice pleaded.

One moral of this story is that a mistake is what you think it is, but if you look at it in another way, it could be a windfall.

I'm not sure of the moral of the second story, but it is one I love telling, on account of its intercultural humour. As a monk, I once spent my rains retreat in a small Thai Buddhist centre in Holland. The eve of the rains entry was Asalha Puja, a festive day with lots of spicy Thai food.

Harold, a young Dutch friend of mine, was there, too. A dish of jam-coloured spread at once caught his eye.

"Is this nice?" he asked me.

"Oh, yes, I love it." I replied, and then walked away to attend to something else.

Before I knew it, I heard a horrific scream, "Ahhhh! I'm burning!" The next thing I saw was Harold, after throwing the fiery spread into a refuse bin, opening the fridge and guzzling down a bottle of cold milk.

"You told me it was nice!" he complained.

"I'm sorry! But I said that I love it!" It was Thai sambal (hot chili mixture), which he had generously spread on a slice of bread.

Apparently, what's sauce for the goose, is *not* always sauce for the gander.

7 The Story of a Butterfly

The writer of this beautiful story, often found on the Internet, is unknown. Like any good story, it has different meanings to different people. I feel a profound connection with the story as it helps me relate closely to the Buddha's teaching of self-reliance in personal development. First, let us look at the story:

> A man found a pupa of a butterfly. One day a small opening appeared. He sat and watched the butterfly for several hours as it

> struggled to squeeze its body through the tiny hole. Then it stopped, as if it couldn't go further.
>
> So the man decided to help the butterfly. He took a pair of scissors and snipped off the remaining bits of cocoon. The butterfly emerged easily but it had a swollen body and shriveled wings.
>
> The man continued to watch it, expecting that any minute the wings would enlarge and expand enough to support the body. Neither happened! In fact, the butterfly spent the rest of its life crawling around. It was never able to fly.
>
> What the man in his kindness and haste did not understand: The restricting cocoon and the struggle required by the butterfly to get through the opening was a way of forcing the fluid from the body into the wings so that it would be ready for flight once that was achieved.
>
> Sometimes, struggles are exactly what we need in our lives. Going through life with no obstacles would cripple us. We will not be as strong as we could have been and we would never happily fly.
>
> So have a nice day; struggle a little and learn well.

For me, this is a powerful reminder of how Buddhist meditation gently allows us to evolve and grow in a cocoon of calm and stillness, so that we can accept ourselves just as we are. This may sound simplistic, even trite. The point is how many of us really accept ourselves as we really are. We do not even know ourselves.

How do we end up like the maimed butterfly? We maim our emotional selves, we stunt our spiritual growth, when we keep measuring ourselves against others, or when we blindly allow our lives to be dictated by others. When what controls us is from outside of ourselves, we clearly do not have self-control. Our happiness is defined

and decided by others. In other words, we can never be really happy.

We must constantly ask ourselves what we are thinking, saying or doing: “Am I happy doing this?” If we are, we must then ask, “Am I hurting myself doing this; am I hurting others; am I hurting the environment?” If the answer is “no” in all three counts, then that’s fine. If there is even one “yes,” we need to ask why, and adjust our actions accordingly.

On the other hand, when we ask, “Am I happy doing this?” And the answer is “no,” we need to ask ourselves again, “Why so? Why am I not happy?”

Occasionally, try to visualize ourselves having achieved our life’s goal (following the guidelines we have just listed). Then, we work our way backwards: what must we do to attain this goal? What must we do before that? And so on, until we arrive at where we are now. We are then better aware of what we need to do with our lives.

If we have done all we can, and things still do not seem to work our way, then we need to reflect on the butterfly story. We are still evolving in our karmic cocoon; let things be for a while. Do what needs to be done for the present. And keep asking ourselves: “What do I do next?” Don’t think, just feel, be at peace with ourselves: we will hear the answer soon enough.

8 The Seven Wonders

(1) It’s a wonder,
Even without eyes, to see what naked eyes see not:
Close your eyes to truly see.
The open eye often looks to the past.
Our heart opens the inner eye, and looks deep
Into another: as I am, so are you; as you are, so am I.

(2) It's a wonder,
Even without ears, to listen to what prying ears fail to hear:
Don't just hear, but listen long
To the silence of the words, the stillness between the music.
For there can be no sense nor music without silence.
Above all, listen to your heart, yearning to be free.

(3) It's a wonder,
Even without a nose, to smell what pointed noses fail to smell:
The true fragrance of love without walls,
Loving others as you would others love you.
They pass us by, all looking for love, but not knowing how,
Till the heart smiles, and beats in your outstretched hand.

(4) It's a wonder,
Even without a tongue, to taste what flat tongues fail to taste:
The taste of freedom in true goodness,
Flowing like gushing rivers down mountains and valleys
Into the mingling mighty ocean,
Where water is simply called water.

(5) It's a wonder,
Even without a body, to feel what the sensual body feels not:
The joy of inner stillness, when the body has had its fill.
To be kindly aware of your own body is like coming home,
A warm home that breathes every moment for you,
Till you are one with nirvana's breath.

(6) It's a wonder,
Even when troubled, to laugh at our sufferings and silliness,
And to teach others not to fall where you have fallen.
For, pain is our first teacher, and the last,
Before joy comes gently but firmly to hold our hands:
We have never suffered really, only we have not looked hard enough.

(7) It's a wonder,
Even when unloved, to show love to the unloving;
For, only in giving love, do you have love.
Even when the other does not requite your love,
It is not your fault that one loves you not.
For, a greater love awaits you, but whose time is yet to come.

Ask me not what these words mean;
For only your heart will tell you;
Look deep into the stillness there
For what words fail to say.

9 Living Well, Dying Well

To be a Buddhist is to know we have eyes and to use them well; to have ears, nose, tongue, body, and above all, to know we have a mind and use it well. We learn to sense peace and beauty, or at least we know it is possible to do so. We do not just see a glorious sunset or a beautiful flower, but experience it fully. To do that we need to suspend all judgement and disbelief, and just be present with the sunset, with the flower, with the people we love, with those whom we care about.

Sometimes we read something so beautiful; it leaves us speechless; it should. For beauty is beyond all languages, even poetry or art. The most beautiful poetry is not in words; it is not read, nor heard. The best poetry is felt deep in our hearts, when we are truly present with this joyful moment, this beautiful inner silence, which even the most enchanting music can only echo, and which words fail to convey.

If we ponder over the great figures of history who have enriched our lives, we will see this sense of goodness, peace and beauty. Such great minds always have a place in their hearts for the Buddha, and also see goodness in others. One such example is the analytic

philosopher, Richard Rorty (1931-2007), who wrote in his "The Fire of Life" (*Poetry,* Nov 2007), some of the most beautiful lines ever written:

> Shortly after finishing "Pragmatism and Romanticism," I was diagnosed with inoperable pancreatic cancer. Some months after I learned the bad news, I was sitting around having coffee with my elder son and a visiting cousin. My cousin (who is a Baptist minister) asked me whether I had found my thoughts turning toward religious topics, and I said no. "Well, what about philosophy?" my son asked. "No," I replied, neither the philosophy I had written nor that which I had read seemed to have any particular bearing on my situation. I had no quarrel with Epicurus's argument that it is irrational to fear death, nor with Heidegger's suggestion that ontotheology originates in an attempt to evade our mortality. But neither *ataraxia* (freedom from disturbance) nor *Sein zum Tode* (being toward death) seemed in point.
>
> "Hasn't *anything* you've read been of any use?" my son persisted. "Yes," I found myself blurting out, "poetry." "Which poems?" he asked. I quoted two old chestnuts that I had recently dredged up from memory and been oddly cheered by, the most quoted lines of Swinburne's "Garden of Proserpine":
>
> > We thank with brief thanksgiving
> > Whatever gods may be
> > That no life lives forever;
> > That dead men rise up never;
> > That even the weariest river
> > Winds somewhere safe to sea.
>
> and Landor's "On His Seventy-Fifth Birthday":

Nature I loved, and next to Nature, Art;
I warmed both hands before the fire of life,
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.

(Richard Rorty, *The Fire of Life,* 2007)

As I read these, I feel my weaknesses, my ego, my self-righteousness, my foolishness, do not seem worthwhile any more; I begin to see greater goodness in others. I am all alone in such moments, but never lonely. For, I can feel the warmth of spiritual greatness before me. I am most of all reminded of the supreme sacrifices that the Buddha has made to give us such wisdom so that we learn to treasure our senses and use them really well to see true peace and beauty.

All my post-childhood life I have wandered like Sudhana in the Gandhavyuha, who is but fortunate to find so many great teachers. I found only a few, for whom I am profoundly grateful for all the wisdom they have imparted to me. Sadly, these were only brief moments, like lightning-flashes in a dark storm. But they are enough for me to see my way through it. And, the still bright dawn is rising.

It is so difficult to find a truly good teacher; that is, until I found the Suttas, the Buddha Dharma. I can almost feel how Ānanda feels at the Buddha's passing, when he reflects:

The old ones have passed away,
I do not get along with the new ones.
Today I meditate all alone
Like a bird gone to its nest. (Tha 1036)

I hear Sariputta, the greatest saint after the Buddha, singing these fearless words in the Theragatha:

I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;
I shall cast aside this body fully aware and mindful.
I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life;

I await my time as a servant his wages. (Tha 1002 f)

If you read this as if you wrote it yourself, the benefit would likely be greater. Forget me for a moment; focus on yourself.

10 The Possibility of Awakening

We Have Unconscious Views

The main difficulty with unconscious views is that *we are not aware of them*. Since we are unable to see them, we think that they do not exist. And so they perniciously proliferate and control our whole being. This is the main reason why people, especially the religious, are intolerant of others. Their unconscious views act like a radar, always looking out for any remark, word or gesture that is perceived as being made against them.

Unconscious views are like memes,[13] and they are in some ways synonymous—they have only one purpose: *to replicate themselves*, that is, I-making (*ahaṁ,kāra*). Whatever is perceived as threatening to burst this balloon, this I-pod, of the self, is quickly pushed away, or reactively scorned. Such a person is comfortable with his own views only, and as such is afraid to be proven wrong. The fear of letting go of the old and familiar is so strong, that all learning has stopped.

And yet it is not difficult to overcome unconscious views. We only need to bring them up to the conscious level, into the light of mindfulness, accept them with lovingkindness, and then set them free. When unconscious views are let go of, liberated, they are no more unconscious, they become conscious of themselves as it were. They might be said to be simply *mental energy*, which is then converted into wholesome energy. Lustful desire becomes

[13] See **Memes** = SD 26.3.

desire for good; hatred that is dark becomes the hatred of evil; and hazy delusion clears into an understanding of the wholesome.

Good Is Possible

The main rationale for religion is that it reminds us that good is possible, it empowers us to do good, and that good benefits the individual as well as society. To benefit from good means to enjoy happiness here and hereafter. Happiness here ideally comprises physical independence, economic independence, social independence, emotional independence, and spiritual independence.

Physical independence is basically good health, attended by a wholesome control of our body and speech (that is, keeping to the five precepts). Such good health allows us to be productively engaged in right livelihood so that we are *economically independent*. We are then in a good position to be a contributive member of our community and society without being misled by the crowd, and yet able to move it in a wholesome direction.

Being *emotionally independent* means that we are capable of thinking for ourselves, and yet capable of understanding individual differences in others to promote solidarity. *Spiritual independence* is our capacity for happiness through inner stillness without the need for external approval or support: we are our own refuge, the Dharma is our refuge.

Spiritual Awakening

The Buddha's discourses constantly remind us that good is possible, that we can, through self-effort, awaken to spiritual freedom. **The (Loka) Assāda Sutta**[14] succinctly explains the nature of the world and the possibility of goodness, thus:

[14] See A 3.102/1:260 = SD 14.7.

> Bhikshus, if there were no gratification in the world, beings would not be attached to this world. But, bhikshus, as there is gratification in the world, beings are attached to this world.
>
> Bhikshus, if there were no danger in the world, beings would not be repulsed at this world. But, bhikshus, as there is danger in the world, beings are repulsed at this world.
>
> Bhikshus, if there were no escape from the world, beings could not escape from this world. But, bhikshus, as there is an escape from the world, beings can escape from this world.
>
> But, bhikshus, so long as the world's beings have directly known, as it really is,
>
> the gratification as gratification,
> the danger as danger,
> the escape as escape,
>
> to that extent, bhikshus, they dwell with a mind that is *free* from it, detached from it, released from it, not confined to this world with its devas, Māra and Brahmā, in this generation with its ascetics and brahmins, its devas and humans.

And **Saḷha Sutta**[15] celebrates the joy of the liberated mind, that is free from unconscious views:

> He understands thus:
>
> Previously there was *greed* in me: that was unwholesome. Now there is none: this is wholesome.
>
> Previously there was *hatred* in me: that was unwholesome. Now there is none: this is wholesome.
>
> Previously there was *delusion* in me: that was unwholesome. Now there is none: this is wholesome.
>
> In this very life itself he himself dwells freed from craving, cool, become cool; experiencing happiness, become divine.

[15] See A 3.66/1:193-197 = SD 43.6.

11 Does the Buddha Have Feelings?

There is a common misconception that the Buddha and the arhats do not have any feelings since they have overcome all defilements. But not all feelings are defilements. The **Mahā Saccaka Sutta** (M 36)[16], for example, records how the Buddha, recalling how he had meditated and attained dhyana as a 7-year-old child under a jambu tree during the ploughing festival, realizes that there is "a pleasure that has nothing to do with sensual pleasures and unwholesome states" (M 36.32/1:246 f).

This wholesome pleasure is that of dhyana (Pali: jhana) or deep meditation, which the Buddha attains by breath meditation. Coming out of the dhyana, in the stillness and clarity of his mind, the Buddha directly sees true reality and awakens to nirvana.

Even today, those who do Buddhist meditation of one kind or other experience great joy. Whether we use the Vipassana (Insight) Meditation or the Forest Meditation, when we learn to see the present moment as it is, we feel a profound bliss. It is this kind of bliss that helps wisdom to arise when we see the joy as being impermanent.

From the **Mahā Parinibbāna Sutta** (D 16)[17], which records the last days of the Buddha, we know that the Buddha feels pain. The 80-year-old Buddha describes how he is attacked by severe sickness and sharp pains, which he can only overcome through deep meditation (D 16.2.26/2:100 f).

The most interesting thing the discourses tell us about the Buddha is perhaps that he feels for his disciples. The **Saḷāyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 137) [18]—the discourse on the analysis of the six elements

[16] M 36 = SD 1.12.
[17] D 16 = SD 9.
[18] M 137 = SD 29.5.

—for example, shows how the Buddha gives the teaching of the three bases of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*). This is different from the better known set of four focusses of mindfulness.

The three bases of mindfulness are about how the Buddha responds to three types of situations when he teaches:

"Here, bhikshus, the Teacher teaches the Dharma to his disciples, out of compassion, for their happiness, moved by compassion, thinking, 'This is for your welfare! This is for your happiness!'"

(1) His disciples do not wish to listen, do not pay attention, do not make an effort to understand the Teaching, and deviate from the Teaching.

As such, the Buddha is not pleased, but although not feeling pleased, he dwells untroubled, mindful and fully aware.

(2) Some of his disciples listen, pay attention, make an effort to understand the Teaching, and do not deviate from the Teaching.

As such, the Buddha is pleased, but although feeling pleased, he dwells untroubled, mindful and fully aware.

(3) His disciples listen, pay attention, make an effort to understand the Teaching, and do not deviate from the Teaching.

As such, the Buddha is pleased, but although feeling pleased, he dwells untroubled, mindful and fully aware.

It is clear from this Saḷāyatana Vibhaṅga Sutta (M 137) passage that the Buddha (and other awakened beings) do have feelings towards how others behave. This is only natural, and indeed it would be very weird if the Buddha and the arhats had no feelings at all! The "negative" feelings are simply a reflection of the reality of the situation, but none of these feelings affect or trouble the Buddha or the saints in any way: they only see the arising of great compassion to remove the suffering and ignorance of these beings.

This is the true meaning of equanimity. We do feel disappointed when others do not seem to respond positively to the good we have done. On the other hand, sometimes, people may seem overwhelmed by the kindness we have shown. Either way, we should be mindful and remain unaffected by them.

The point is that we should not depend on external conditions for our true happiness. We should cultivate the kind of inner happiness that is good in itself, that is independent of any condition. This is called unconditional love.

12 The Mouths Are Moving

A well known Chan (Zen) anecdote is the Gateless Gate (*Wúmén'-guān*; Japanese Mumonkan) case 29. Two monks notice a temple flag flapping. One says that the flag is moving; the other argues that it is the wind that is moving. The Sixth Patriarch comes along and declares both of them wrong: it is the mind that is moving, he declares!

Centuries later, Brahmavamso, a forest dhyana master, in one of his public talks in Singapore in 2005,[19] humorously declares *all three to be wrong*: their mouths are moving!

Modern commentary by this non-zensical Singaporean ignoramus: All the four mouths are moving! Not mine: only my fingers are moving over the computer keyboard, while I'm gazing silly at the pixels.

But when I relate this well known story to my class, I add that I'm also one of those whose mouths are moving. This is when you in

[19] See *Dhamma Journal* 2004 5,1:13, or ch 14 of Brahmavamso's forthcoming book, *The Beautiful Breath*.

your silence are the wisest of all. Anyway, it's a matter of time before you move your own mouth about this to someone else.

Such living exchanges are a healthy reminder for us to go beyond conceptual language and dogmatic hard-heartedness, and experience the conditioned nature of the world, if not to taste not-self or emptiness itself.

Let us now look at the original story from the Gateless Gate, and discover a surprise: that Wumen Huikai (the compiler and commentator) had after all anticipated us all! That's how Chan masters work!

> 無門關　第二十九 公案　六祖之　非風非幡
> Wú mén'guān dì'èr shíjǐu gōng'àn Liù zū zhī fēi fēng fēi fān
> **Wúmén'guān case 29: The Sixth Patriarch's "Not wind, not flag"**
>
> 因風颺刹幡。　有二僧、對論。
> yīnfēngyángchà fān. yǒu èr sēng, duì lùn
> A temple flag [streamer] was flapping because of the wind. Two monks were arguing.
>
> 一云、幡動。一云、風動。
> yì yún, fān dòng. yì yún, fēng dòng.
> One said, "The flag is moving!" The other said, "The wind is moving!"
>
> 往復曾未契理。
> wǎngfùcéngwèi qì lǐ
> They argued back and forth, but could not reach a conclusion.
>
> 祖云、不是風動、不是幡動、仁者心動。
> Zǔ yún, bú shì fēng dòng, bú shì fān dòng, rén zhě xīn dòng
> The Patriarch said, "It is not the wind that is moving; it is not the flag that is moving—it is your mind that is moving!"

二僧悚然。
èr sēng sǒng rán
The two monks were awe-struck.

Wumen's Comment

無門曰、不是風動、不是幡動、不是心動、
Wú mén yuè, bú shì fēng dòng, bú shì fān dòng, bú shì xīn dòng,
甚處見祖師
shěn chù jiàn Zǔshī.
Wumen says: “It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is not the mind that moves. How do you see the patriarch?

若向者裏見得親切、 方知二僧買鐵得金。
ruò xiàng zhě lǐ jiàn de qīn qiè, fāngzhī èr sēng mǎi tiě de jīn.
If you see this deeply [If you truly understand this], then you will know that the two monks, buying iron, received gold.

祖師忍俊不禁、一場漏逗。
Zǔ shī rěn jùn bùjīn, yì cháng lòu dòu.
The venerable Patriarch could not hold back his mirth, and teased them for a while.”

Wumen's Verse 頌曰 sòng yuè

風幡心動 fēng fān xīn dòng
Wind, flag, and mind are moving;

一状領過 yì zhuàng lǐng guò
All are equally to blame.

只知開口 zhǐ zhī kāi kǒu
They only know how to open their mouths,

不覺話墮 bù jué huà duò
Unaware of their fault in talking.

13 Worlds of Our Own

We are often affected by others, by our work and our environment. Our mental states, too, affect others, our work and our environment. Caught in the midst of our private realities and external situations, we regularly swing through the six realms. In our excruciating pains and mental torments, we fall into the lowest of the realms, the hells.

In our ignorance and fear, easily succumbing to the tricks and threats of others, we are caught in the predictability of the animal realm. Afflicted by insatiable cravings, whether through lack of fulfillment or despite much of it, we are chained to the shadowy preta realm (as ghosts). Our jealous struggles and violent ambitions turn us into ruthless asuras (power-crazy demons), measuring others in terms of what profit or pleasure they can bring us.

Occasionally, during breaks and holidays, when we are able to get away from our work, from those we dislike, and from an oppressive environment, we momentarily taste a heavenly respite. Maybe it is a good meditation, or an invigorating Dharma study, or the pleasant presence of true-hearted friends. But it all passes on too soon. If we are skillful enough, we might just be able to remain on the human level, that is, until the samsaric cycle of the realms starts all over again.

In a cyclic existence, it is difficult to evolve spiritually, to be our true selves. The rat-race turns each of us into a mere social unit, a "statistical individual," that is, a member of a group, who in fact has no real existence apart from the group and who, therefore, possesses no true individuality. As such a person, we often simply accept the standards, values, and realities of the group to which we belong.

Being statistical individuals, therefore, we usually have a low quality of consciousness. We are unaware of our true potential, as we are

often emotionally dependent on others, who could be a guru figure, a parent figure, a powerful religious being, or the group. Even being "fashionable" can mean that we are caught in the rut of what others think is right or best for us.

Sometimes, it all appears to be such a heavy responsibility that we are tempted to try to hand it all over to someone else, maybe to a "God", or some fashionable Oriental or Western guru-figure, or some power figure, in the hope that he or she will arrange everything for us with as little trouble as possible. We will have handed over our remote control to others!

To get out of the rut, we must *want* to grow spiritually, and be *able* to do so. To be *able* to grow is to start with a truly self-affirming method of personal development. It starts with an unconditional self-acceptance: we have to start right where we are, and progress from there. We need to understand the personal nature of impermanence: we can change for the better. We need to reflect on the characteristic of not-self: there is no one who is a failure, there is no problem person—there are only difficult situations and problems.

We need to accept the problematic situation before we can define it. We then need to look for its causes and conditions *within* ourselves, our patterns of behaviour, our reactions to situations. We need to confront our unwholesome habitual behaviour. As we look deeper, we will see various ways out. We should choose the best path to free ourselves, even if this means going through trial and error.

In other words, we do not live by rice or bread alone, not by blind faith. We are how our senses (eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind) work, how we make *sense* of things. We react with feeling towards them, but these feelings are often controlled by our past. As a result, we never really live the present moment of the sense-ex-

perience, but colour and distort them with our mental volitions; and so our consciousness reinforces itself.

However, even when the physical body is deprived of material food and dies, our mental body or existential consciousness[20] continues to be what we think, and we are reborn according to how we use our sense-faculties. As we think, so we speak and act. As we think, speak and act, so we become, and will be, again and again.

Let us live as emotionally independent individuals, like clear mirrors unto ourselves, and unto others. Let us see ourselves in others, and let us see their true good selves in us. Let us see our own inner goodness and rejoice. We will then be capable of sharing happiness with others, that is, before we attain nirvana ourselves. [43]

14 Helping One Another In Faith

How non-Buddhists can do Buddhist meditation

In 2006, one of my meditation class students, a concerned Christian who teaches and counsels at a small church here, came to see me. He asked me how he could get some of his congregation members to meditate. He was concerned that so many of them not only have problems, but are "cerebral," meaning that they tend to simply follow what the pastor said out of blind faith or expect immediate palpable benefits from their faith. He also remarked that there are many "false prophets" who teach their own concoction of "Christianity," when they are really opinionated materialistic people.

So what's new: we see the same problems in Buddhism, I replied without much comfort. It looks like we share the same problems and concerns, despite coming from different faiths. I mentioned a few passages from the Bible that, in my opinion, have close affinity with Buddhist meditation. For example, the Bible says that "the

[20] See ***Viññāṇa*** = SD 17.8a(6).

Kingdom of God is within you," that is, the truth is *not* out there: it is *in* here, which means that meditation can help.

One of the skillful means I suggested to her is to explain that a Christian practising breath meditation or lovingkindness cultivation is being like Christ crucified. One is removed from the ground and nailed to a cross. The crucified Christ was in an intermediate state, suspended, as it were, between earth and heaven. Similarly, in meditation, we let go of the world, for a while at least, so that we can enjoy higher states. This transition from the world to meditative peace can be painful at first, but it is worth it. [48]

We shared a number of other interesting points from our respective scriptures related to meditation. At one point, by way of comforting him, I told him that the path we have taken—to bring the healing truth to others with the message that they can help themselves—we may have to work alone. Yet, we should neither fret nor fear working alone, especially when it is something in which we hear a calling (that is what "vocation" originally means).

Just before the Buddha's awakening, his only five attending monks deserted him in contempt, accusing him of being "luxurious" for having eaten a plate of milk-rice (so that he could nurse his body for deep meditation). If the Buddha had conceded to the five that "the majority is right," we would have no Buddha Dharma today. He struggled on alone on Vesak Day to become the Buddha.

Even so, just before the Crucifixion, in the garden of Gethsemene, the sad Christ was all alone praying for guidance while his followers were asleep around him (although he had asked one of them to keep guard). In fact, after he was arrested by the authorities, his own close disciple Peter *denied* him three times! (This is the apostle who was later enthroned as the first Pope.) [39]

Similarly, today we see many so-called Buddhists denying the Buddha, or inventing their own Buddhas; or claiming some teacher of

theirs or the "future Buddha" to be more relevant today. But my point is regarding something closer to heart: how we should regard failure and suffering. It's all right to fail; it is normal to have problems, to suffer—but it is also important to humbly seek help when you need it. When we really need help, we begin to know who really are the caring friends and who are not—or perhaps, not yet.

Then he comforted me, as it were, by pointing out that the Old Testament contains the story of the prophet Elijah who lived in a time when many prophets were killed by those in power. Elijah thought he was alone and was in fear, but God was behind him all the time. It is interesting, I thought, that fear and loneliness often go together. In meditation, we know the meditator is never lonely, that is, as long as he feels *joy.* It is the lack of joy that makes one feel lonely, not the absence of others.

Sooner or later, we will have to stand *alone* in some difficult situation or in an important moment of our lives. It means that something truly great is awaiting us. We are not really alone: we have our *good karma*, and if we have *joy* deep inside us, we are never really alone. Look within at the present moment of the breath: it is the only place we can touch life and reality. There lies true joy and freedom.

We came into this world alone, and will leave it alone, but while in between, let us bring solace and wisdom to those who do not yet understand the meaning of this. 25th December is "Buddhist Renewal Day": think not of what you cannot do, but of what little or much you *can* do for yourself in the Dharma; then do this for others, too.

Only one thing still troubles me: what would the Buddha and Christ say, if they were alive and well today, looking at what we have done to their teachings!

15 To a Listening Year 2010

My years of being a Buddhist for the last quarter-century have taught me much about the Buddha's teachings. My 20 years as a Theravada monk gave me enough training to have a good idea of what Buddhism (or at least early Buddhism) is really about. One difficulty is that this vision of what Buddhism really is changes over time, in a good way. As I look back I now see Buddhism as becoming simpler and simpler to practise.

This simplification of Buddhism began with my letting go of traditional Buddhism. I have not forgotten these teachings and training, and they would indeed always be happy memories of my life. However, Buddhism is more than just a cultural tradition; that is to say, it is simpler than a cultural tradition.

A second interesting development in my Buddhist life was when I lived with a western Buddhist community in the UK in the 1980s. This was where I learned how western and westernized Buddhists transformed Buddhism into something meaningful to them. This valuable experience showed me that Buddhism can be relevant in our modern westernized world.

Another development in my Buddhist learning process was in the early 1990s, the time I spent as a visiting scholar in the University of California at Berkeley. This was a mostly academic approach to Buddhism, which was refreshing, because it allowed me to keep an open mind about religions in general. It was also a time when the email was becoming popular, and Buddhist texts were being digitized (of which my sponsoring professor, Lewis Lancaster, was a pioneer).

From these decades, one memory remains permanently engraved in my mind: the moments I spent listening to various teachers, professors, colleagues and friends who were desirous of learning

Buddhism. There were great libraries and bookshops, too, in Bangkok, the UK and Berkeley, California, so that I could build up a sizeable and valuable library of Buddhist scriptures and Buddhist-related works, which are of great help to my present translating project and teaching of early Buddhism.

These decades were very happy ones because I met various living great practitioners, such as Chaokhun Prayudh Payutto, Ajahn Sumedho, and Mahasi Sayadaw, not to mention many kind and humble monastic teachers who taught me Dharma, Vinaya and Pali. I call these decades the "listening years."

A learning environment pervaded those decades. I am reminded of what Galileo once quipped, "I have never met a man so ignorant that I couldn't learn something from him." The best teacher, however, is not a person, but a listening ear. This is often mentioned in the discourses such the 12-step learning process of the Canki Sutta (M 95),[21] or the teaching of the (Āhāra) Avijja Sutta (A 10.61).[22]

In fact, an awakened Buddhist is not really a "disciple," but a true "listener" (*sāvaka*). Listening deeply to the Dharma, the listener becomes liberated from suffering. Even as a Bodhisattva, the Buddha is a deep listener. As the Buddha, he becomes an even deeper listener, who is able to hear both audible sounds and inaudible sounds. The audible sounds speak of suffering, but the inaudible sounds, if we carefully listen to them, tell us the way out of such suffering.

When we are very young, we are told to listen, but we usually don't. As teenagers, we are told to listen, but we simply won't. As adults, we are told to listen, but we listen almost only to our desires. As older folks, we think we know how to listen, but we often don't.

[21] M 95.20/2:173 = SD 21.15.
[22] A 10.61/5:113-116 = SD 31.10.

Giving advice is a karmically responsible act; it affects us, too. As such, it must be done with patience and wisdom.

Even the Buddha, much as he is able to read another's mind, would not at once advise another. He would often guide the listener by asking, "What do you think?" and only when the listener is calm and ready, he would teach them. More often than not, the Buddha would use the "Socratic method," asking helpful questions until the listener himself sees the truth within.[23]

The point is that to listen to others is to appreciate them. The Buddha is wise because he is himself a great listener right to the end. The truth of not-self teaches us that there is no fixed personality, and, as such, no fixed problem. When we listen carefully to a troubled person, the words express and define the problem. In the silence in between the words is where the solution lies.

As a true listener, our task is to referee the troubled person's speech so that he is able to hear his heart's clear stillness. A good listener teaches others to listen to themselves. The best person to solve a problem is the person himself; for, if he knows how to listen to himself, he will hear the solution. The best teacher teaches another to truly know himself. Early Buddhism, as such, is a self-listening, a self-help method of spiritual liberation.

May the New Year bring you more than success and prosperity: may you find happiness in the present moment and be a source of happiness to others, too.

Listen to your heart when it is happy; for it will bring out the best of you and of others. When it is sad, listen to your mind; it will remind you to look deeper and longer into your heart.

May the New Year be a listening year. [44]

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[23] See eg **Anatta,lakkhaṇa Sutta** (S 22.59/3:66-68) = SD 1.2.

16 Living Buddhism

Buddhism is like good healthy food. It has to be tasted, eaten, fully enjoyed and digested. Only in that way can we really benefit from it. For maximum benefit, it is best self-prepared and taken fresh.

Avoid the canned import: they lack nutrients that locals need. Avoid the fast food version: they are badly unbalanced. Avoid the beautifully labelled large containers which are really empty. Avoid those foods peddled by suave well-dressed executives with easy promises: they are just like fast food but cost exorbitantly more.

Buddhism is a DIY (do-it-yourself) kit that anyone can use with proper initial instructions. But first we must know how to read, and to read properly. This is what keeping to the precepts is about: we try our best to act and speak in a way helpful to us and others, and to simplify our lives.

An uncluttered life is a good preparation for uncluttering the mind. Keeping to the precepts simplifies our lives so that we easily and effectively engage ourselves in mental cultivation or meditation. This is not about hours of seat-warming, but about quality time that we spend with our selves.

Buddhist meditation is knowing our own minds so that we know ourselves better. The more patient and non-judgemental we are with what goes on in our minds, the closer we are to knowing our selves. Simply watch the breath in a relaxed but sustained manner (we are, after all, admiring a life-long loyal friend). Whenever the mind wanders off, patiently bring it back to the breath: it's like training a pet.

As we befriend our mind, it returns the compliment. It listens to us more. One amazing thing we will notice is that much of those thoughts that crowd our minds are really unnecessary, even unreal. They mostly come from the past, and should remain there.

An uncluttered life (being healthy in body, action and speech) and an uncluttered mind (letting go of the past and crossing the bridge when we come to it) is an excellent way to cultivate great insight to further self-understanding. This is the miracle of the present moment.

The inner peace we gain through breath meditation allows us to look deep into the present moment where our mind really is. The closer we look, the more we see our true nature and personality. We can see that deep in our peaceful hearts there is so much good. It is because we have been looking outside of ourselves too much and looking at others too often, that we forget how happy we really are deep inside.

One very important advice in being truly happy: avoid negative talk of sin, guilt and bad karma (they only cause trouble). We are all we've got, and if we do not forgive ourselves, no one will. Therefore, we should learn to love ourselves and accept ourselves unconditionally: "I forgive myself. I'm OK; I'm well and happy."

Meditation helps us to realize that we are capable of change: that we *can* change our minds; that we *need* to change our minds. And if we change our minds for the better, we also help to change the people around us and our ambience.

When bad things happen, we begin to understand that there is no one to be blamed. Not God, nor karma, nor bad luck, nor the boss, nor the other person, definitely not us. Things happen when the conditions are right (or wrong): it takes a lot of conditions to come together for something to happen, and we are only one of the conditions. So we should not take all the blame.

A cultivated mind and a happy heart allow us to see all such conditions in a helpful way, so that we really know what has gone wrong. A scientist would not curse his experiments if he fails to find an answer. He would look out for patterns of behaviour and events

that conduce to such problems and avoid them; and he would work on conditions that allow him to move on in a positive way.

Our sufferings and inabilities are not punishment for things we have done in the past. They are telling us that some parts of our lives are still not yet strengthened, and that there are some skills we still need to learn. When our head is clear and our heart is cool, we will know just what to do.

The next time we think we cannot solve your problem, try observing a toddler who is learning to walk. He or she stands, tries to take a step, falls flat, stands again, falls again, and so on. But the toddler never gives up, and he or she is now able to walk very well. That toddler was us!

17 A Truly Purposeful Life

The National University of Singapore Business School, in a recent survey, found that Singaporeans with university degrees or those who earn S$5000 or more a month are the happiest. Yet they are unhappy with their lot and enjoy life the least, compared to others who make less money.

This unhappiness, says the Straits Times editorial of the Sunday Times (17 January 2010) "could stem from their higher, unfulfilled expectations." The high-incomers probably define their happiness as having fine food, fancy cars and fabulous homes. But this kind of happiness is only physical and external and, as such, very limited.

These "successful" high-incomers are generally dissatisfied and unhappy probably because they keep measuring themselves against others. Other people may be perceived to be "happy," but in reality they, too, have their own issues.

Moreover, happiness is not a regular event like one's work, meals, or toilet, and one's circumstances often change. The point is that we

are unlikely to be really happy if we define our happiness by others' standards; for it is a form of emotional dependence.

Many thinking Buddhists would also say that happiness has to do with our purpose in life. But first, we need to understand what "purpose" here really means. If there is any purpose in life, I would say that it is to grow. Understandably, this does not mean merely growing old, ending in death, as this happens whether we wish it or not. A very important purpose of life, in fact, must be to grow up, that is, to grow spiritually.

To grow in the spirit is to understand at least two important things. First, we need to understand what happiness really is. For our present purpose, it can be said to be a feeling of interconnectedness with everyone (especially those we love) and with everything around us.

Secondly, growing spiritually means understanding that the physical world and material things are only means to an end, and not ends in themselves. Money, for example, is what money buys. What we buy or keep should be guided by necessity and wisdom.

An effective way to live happily is to have a wholesome purpose-driven life. Such a purpose can be merely instrumental (such as working hard to be able to bring happiness to those we love) or intrinsic, that is, being passionate about what we do and what we believe in. An intrinsic purpose of life must be a wholesome one because we enjoy doing it for itself. Not only are we happy doing it, but it benefits others, too.

We can never be truly happy by ourselves while others around us suffer; that is, if we are really wholesome beings capable of being moved by goodness and compassion. In this sense, we can be happy by being devoted to something bigger than our self.

This sense of something bigger than our self is naturally something that transcends the notion of a personal self. We first need to understand or at least accept that any notion of self is merely a limiting construct, a wall to keep others out of our lives. We can start to break down this cold wall by doing something as simple as giving up a seat in a train to someone who needs it more, or something more difficult such as switching off our phones in a study class and giving our undivided attention and respect to another (the teacher or speaker), or something much bigger like doing beneficial social work.

For me that bigger-than-self task is the Sutta Discovery translation work which I always look forward to after my daily duties of parenting, teaching and counselling have been done. It is a joyful adventure I always look forward to. And then there is the joy of teaching these Suttas to a Dharma-moved audience, and to know that there are others who are studying or teaching these Suttas too. For this is the on-going education of our Buddhist community for their happy future.

My wife Ratna enjoys working with the parents' association of our children's school, getting more parents involved in their children's education and the school itself. She is also a very compassionate and effective mentor of ex-inmates from the Boys' and Girls' Homes. She is simply happy to see her mentees grow and progress happily. In fact, she is so good at this that she has been commended by the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports.

Yet, we all know that such happiness is the fleeting by-product of doing what we are good at, and enjoying it. We also know that this happiness is the fruit of a deeper happiness in the Buddha's Teachings of emotional independence.

Emotional independence means that our view of success, our happiness, is not dependent on praises from others, nor on financial

gains, nor on status and titles, nor on fame. To be emotionally independent means to see our own inner joyful stillness, especially through the Buddha's methods of mental cultivation.

The Buddha's methods of mind-training bring us true happiness that is the profound peace and joy of the aloneness of our still mind. This spiritual aloneness not only dispels worldly loneliness (which arises through lack of inner peace), but also empowers us to abandon our self-centredness, superstitions (dependence on succour from external sources), and self-doubt (that we *can* liberate ourselves from evil and suffering through our own efforts). This in fact is the first step on the path to awakening.

18 Shadow and Light

We are shadows seeking light
Closed eyes that open mouths
Talking about how the sun rises and stars shine
Without ever a look at the heavens

The brighter the light, the darker the shadow,
When we turn away
To adore the dark I-like shape
For it obeys our every wish

Words are forests to the blind
Like rooted saplings not knowing light
We bend and bow to giant trees
But only in the light do we grow free

The holes in our heads are all waxed up
From lack of use and too worded up,
Giving away mere two cents' worth
When we should be saving them up

Humility shown is hidden pride
The truly humble are like the full moon
Reflecting the sun's light into the darkness
Embracing all things in her gentle space

Yet we can be a cool kind shade
Each a bowery tree patiently alone
Where the wise may sit in peace
Weeding and watering us with wisdom

So you think this is about you
But how to count, you are so many
And our hearts do not count,
How to measure warmth and love?

19 Don't Own the Pain

The Buddhist teaching of "not-self" (*anattā*) is difficult to understand. This may well be true, as it is also said that only the fully awakened, the arhats, fully understand the nature of not-self. However, even as unawakened beings, we can have a very good idea of what not-self is. That is, if we allow ourselves to see and learn openly without being blinkered or blinded by any opinion or religion.

Just assume for a moment that we do not know anything. And here we are reading this article. How do we know how to read? A simple answer would be that we have learned English before. We need not even know any religion before. This knowledge comes from past experiences.

How do we understand what this article is trying to say? We can only know as much as we allow ourselves to know. If we allow our past knowledge of reading to flow through our minds like music,

then we will fully enjoy what we are reading. In other words, just as this is written with feeling, it should be read with feeling. Try reading this article (or listening to anyone) without pasting any of our past ideas upon it: it is like reading this as if you have written it yourself. You are likely to learn more from it and enjoy it.

Let's look at this in a different context, that is, with regards to human suffering. First, we need to define, be very clear, about what our suffering is or what is hurting us. "So-and-so caused pain in me: he abused me; he beat me; he defeated me; he stole from me!" What am I really reacting to? The event is long past; so I am really reacting to a *memory* of a long dead event. [31]

A memory is something we choose to think about in such a way that it reinforces itself. It is like the uroboros, a snake that bites its own tail. This is very painful for the snake! If we have accidentally hammered our thumb, and we keep remembering only the pain, it will crowd our minds, and cause us to suffer every time we think about it! This kind of pain must be left at the body level; in that way, it does not recur on the mental level. Although my body is sick, my mind will not be sick.[24]

Now let us apply this principle a little deeper, to our own thoughts, especially negative ones. We think, "So-and-so has hurt me." And then we allow our minds to collect more pains that we perceive to have been done to us. We become even more hurt. Then we tell our friends or anyone who cares to listen about our hurt. Each time we relate the story, our suffering is replayed and reinforced. Actually, *we* are hurting ourselves by replaying an old painful tune.

While people may feel a similar pain when they are hurt, each person reacts to it in a different way. Those who choose to remem-

[24] See Nakula,pitā Sutta, S 22.1 = SD 5.4.

ber it will suffer more than those who are willing to let go of the pain and forgive those who have hurt them.

> "He abused me! He beat me!
> He defeated me! He stole from me!"
> Those who harbour such thoughts
> Their anger does not subside. (Dh 3)

> "He abused me! He beat me!
> He defeated me! He stole from me!"
> Those who harbour *not* such thoughts
> Their anger as such subsides. (Dh 4)

Why do we keep hurting ourselves even after the fact? We are hurt on account of our lust and greed, our hate and aversion, our delusion and ignorance. In short, we are hurt because of our ego or self. But where is the self? It is nowhere to be found.

We are hurt because we are thinking in terms of a *permanent* self, an *unchanging* ego. But a self, if it exists, can only be either physical or mental. What is physical is impermanent; what is mental is impermanent, too. As such, the self is impermanent, our sufferings are impermanent. If we accept this fact, we will heal faster than those who keep reminding themselves of their hurt: for they are like one who keeps opening an old wound. This is where a spiritual exercise can be healing.

The next time you relax beside a lake, notice how ripples form on the water surface. A leaf, a flower, or an object drops on the water, and ripples appear in waves moving outwards. Look closely and you will see with your mind's eye that the water is not moving *outwards*: it is only the kinetic energy pushing the water *upwards* each time. The waves appear to move towards you: moving, yet not moving. There are really no waves, but only water pushed up and down in a patterned way — a temporary disturbance in the pervading stillness.

Our minds work in the same way: we form ideas and emotions, we take them to be real, and we act or react accordingly. A simple way to expose the falseness of such "doings" is to recall some childhood difficulties (such as fear, anger, etc.) we have gone through. Most likely, we would think that we know better now and would have responded differently with that wisdom. The same reasoning should then be applied to our present condition: "What would I do if I were wiser now?"

20 How to be Creative

Some readers have asked me how I could write a reflection or re-visioning every week without fail for the last three years (beginning 2007). It is not always easy, but the sun always rises. The weekly articles started out as short introductions to the Suttas or study topics in the Minding Centre weekly class email. These short write-ups soon became somewhat complete articles in themselves. An important reason for their popularity is that they are very short: they are no longer than two A4 pages, usually ranging between 400-800 words.

The idea is to write something that would evoke samvega (Dharma-moved sense of urgency) or joyful inspiration (*pasāda*). Often I am tempted to write as I think: about bad monastics, weak lay followers, selfish seekers, and problematic issues. But we have often heard about them in the temple gossips and centre talks, and in the newspapers. Let me not add to the sufferings of others.

But then too much of sweet words can cause religious diabetes, a false sense that everything is all right. So I launched a new series called "Revisioning." This new title works like a movie rating: "Be prepared, this is somewhat heavy reading. But you need to know this, and hopefully this will in due course motivate the wise and capable to bring about wholesome Buddhist changes."

As such, in hindsight, we can see that the reflections are written for the individual, a sort of spiritual pep talk so that we are inspired to meditate, or at least not to think so badly of ourselves. The revisionings are meant as reflections on aspects of the Buddhist community, giving some suggestions on how we can improve ourselves as a community. This is a long-term vision.

Where do the inspirations come from? A simple answer would be: from you, that is, what you have told me; from what I have overheard from the Buddhist crowd, mass media reports, and my own visions. There is, however, a deeper inspiration:

> Buddha Dharma has taught me that we can (as unawakened beings) be much better than what we are right now.

I am confident of my own salvation and awakening in this life itself, and I would encourage you, too, to be so: to be confident that you too can be free from suffering in this life itself. The Buddha himself has guaranteed this. You only need to see the Buddha Word.[25] We also need to assure others of their self-awakening.

Tthe narrator of my articles appears in two ways (this is a wonderful way of applying not-self into writing). Firstly, I write "beside myself," that is, as a critic of my own pains and weaknesses. This spiritual exercise is famously found, for example, in the blind monk Cakkhupāla (in the very first story of the Dhammapada Commentary) and the elders' verses (the Theragāthā and the Therīgāthā).

Self-criticism is a powerful way to keep Māra the evil one (or our own negative minds) away. It is a recognition that we can grow out of our present difficulties to be a better and happier person.

The other kind of narrator I sometimes use is the reader, that is, you yourself. You are more likely to feel the positive impact of such a writing by reading it as if you yourself have written it about yourself.

[25] See especially the 10 suttas of the Saṁyutta Nikāya ch 25.

How do I prepare myself to write? I try to write like an artist or musician, rather than like a thinker or a scholar. I try to write, not so much as I think, but more as I feel. The Suttas are like timeless classical pieces. We need a lot of practice to play such pieces well. We need to feel the music in order to interpret it most beautifully, as the composer has intended. A good Sutta translation is like a well-edited musical score, and a conducive hall and good acoustics enhance the wholesome and lasting effects of the music of Dharma.

And for best reception, we need to kill our handphones and give the Dharma our full attention. This is respecting the Dharma and yourself. Otherwise, we will become slaves of an electronic blip. Those whose ears are controlled by their phones will likely find it difficult to meditate, let alone feel joyful stillness.

To feel is a very important Buddhist act, meaning to directly experience life. Look straight and deep into the joys and goodness in our lives, and we will be empowered with beauty and creativity. It is to enjoy the present moment, to see more of our true self.

On the other hand, if we look long enough into the pains and failures of our lives, we will soon see the monsters of our shadows. The best way to tame and change these monsters into goodness is to shine our lovingkind light on them. This is the main reason why I write. [32]

21 Dharma is Music to the Ear

We are living in an age that is seeing what might be called the "fourth turning of the Dharma wheel," the nudges of which began with the 17th-century western colonization of Asia and gained significant momentum in the post-colonial era (within living memory). Such a reinvention —so called because of its widespread innovative ideas — is an attempt at bringing Buddhism closer to the people

and society. But the question arises whether such gestures actually push them further away from the Buddha-centred Dharma.

Academic scholars speak of "historical revisionism," which they define as the reinterpretation of orthodox views on evidence and motivations, and what they decide to do thereafter. On a more personal level, we can say that each of us, at some time, have attempted to reinterpret, even redefine, Buddhism in our own image.

Those intellectually inclined to Buddhism would sooner or later be drawn to fall back on the Chan notion of the "great doubt." Recently I came across this allusion in an article by Stephen Batchelor (*Insight Journal* winter 2010:22), whom I admire as one of the great living Buddhist seekers. I like people who set me thinking about the philosophical and spiritual significance of my own Buddhist views.

By "philosophical" I mean it sets me thinking and examining the value or disvalue of such views and how it affects my own way of thinking. By "spiritual," I mean how clearer or fuzzier I feel about my own convictions and experience of the Buddha's teaching.

Philosophically, I am aware that scholars often criticize how traditional Buddhist masters often make statements without being properly aware of Buddhist history. By this, I think the scholars are asking, "You said this thing, which has been said before by so-and-so (usually a significant Buddhist figure), but do you really know what he meant by it, and are you using this idea in the same way?"

The notion of "great doubt," historically, I think, started with Dàhuì Zōnggǎo, one of Chan Buddhism's most colourfully ambitious figures,[26] who in a moment of insight, came up with this teaching tool. He took the idea of **doubt** very seriously and warned his students that *they must always doubt words*, *so as not to be fooled by them*.

[26] See Piya Tan, "How Buddhism Became Chinese" = SD 40b.5(5.1.3.1-2).

In fact, they should doubt their very existence. He said, "Many students today do not doubt themselves, but they doubt others. And so it is said, 'Within great doubt there necessarily exists great enlightenment'."[27]

Coffee-table Buddhists might take such pithy remarks as cream in their coffee, but I am also curious what happens when we put too much cream into our coffee. My point is that surely such adages do not stop here: the value of an adage is that of moving us on from our ignorance or self-confidence to an inspiration to know better, not to stagnate with the notion that we are right. There is no worth, I'm sure, in what is truly wrong being proven right, even by a great master. As **the (Ahita) Thera Sutta** (A 5.83) says, even famous teachers can have wrong views.[28]

A common powerful trend in the later wheel-turnings is that the wheel-turners have to deal with their cultural baggage. The ancient Chinese, proud of their culture and beliefs, invented Chinese Buddhisms, which became the wheel-forges of the Buddhisms of Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and their diaspora.

A similar cycle is now occurring in the west and the westernized world. We see Buddhism often treated in a procrustean manner, mainly as a result of our cultural conditioning and intellectual pride. Granted, if we are to survey closely as evidence allows, Procrustes' practice of leg-stretching and leg-chopping are done more carefully and less painfully today. But sadly, such an enterprise still leaves us maimed and foreshortened in many ways.

Surely the predominance of such teachings as karma and rebirth in the early canon is sufficient reason to accept that the ancients knew something we are yet to know. Indeed, with the current global access to the early texts, the excellence of Buddhist scholarship, and

[27] T47.1998A.886a27-28; Jap tr: *Chūgoku zenshūshi* 100.
[28] A 5.83/3:114-116 = SD 40a.16.

the availability of the contemplative tradition, we have fewer excuses for forcefully fitting Buddhism onto Procrustes' iron bed.

I am completely comfortable with the teachings of karma and re-birth. They are like two musical instruments in an octet playing the Buddha's musical compositions. As I silently sit in the cavernous Dharma chamber listening to this octet, the music is so soothing, healing and enjoyable.

Occasionally, I wonder if I could play the instruments better, or give a better interpretation of the pieces. But whenever I do that, I only hear noise in my ears; the music is gone. Only when I let go of my thoughts and ambitions, I truly feel the music and beauty.

When we merely *think* of the Dharma, we will see only what we want to see. When we *feel* the Dharma, we will have an ever more direct experience of true reality. I am beginning to understand what the wise poets mean when they say beauty is truth, truth beauty, and that is all we need to know. [45]

22 Why is There Something Rather Than Nothing?

One of the latest engaging arguments for a creator-God centres around the question "Why is there something, rather than nothing?" In western philosophy, this is part of the contingency argument: the universe depends on an explanation outside of itself. The argument is that to make sense of something, we need to relate it to something else.

Horizontally, for example, we can know pleasure only in contrast with pain, or we compare something as being more beautiful than another, and so on. However, it should be borne in mind here that all this is subjective: each person has his or her own level or definition of pleasure, beauty, etc. So everyone is right in a way, but this is not helpful for our discussion.

Arguing vertically, we can say that I am here because I was born from my parents, and they from their parents and so on. We can also imagine the existence and origin of things, say our food, in this way. If we are eating a plate of food from the hawker, we know that the hawker got his ingredients from his suppliers, who in turn planted them or got them from elsewhere, and so on.

On a bigger scale, we can ask: but where do we ultimately come from, or how did the universe come into being? If everything is caused by a previous state, then we could, as it were, ask: what would we ultimately come to if we keep tracing backwards? In other words, what is the first cause? Some claim that this first cause is God or God's actions.

Now we have a very serious problem. The moment we say that there *is* a God, we have put Him (or Her) into time: whatever is in time is impermanent. Similarly, if God *acts*, an action occurs in time: it is again impermanent. Hence, it is impossible for God to exist.

For argument's sake, must there be only *one* God as the first cause? Why not many Gods or gods? If all these Gods and gods exist, they must exist in time: they are all impermanent. Buddhist mythology is full of such beings. But they have no significant role in our spiritual life.

Most theologians (God specialists) reject the notion of an impermanent God. Their God is eternal, they claim. Then they try to explain why: their holy books say so, they have miracles, God has changed their lives, etc.

More problems here. There are many holy books of different religions, and they all claim that only *my* God is the true God; so we will leave it at that, not to be embroiled in any religious violence. Miracles are what you make of it: if miracles are true, they occur in all religions and also outside of religion. Besides, what do we mean by a "miracle"?

The point is that God wouldn't be God if there were an explanation for his existence. But we keep on trying to explain "who, what, how, why, and when" regarding God. It is most interesting that God himself has never spoken anything about himself; we've only ever heard what others say about him.

But we still have not answered the question we began with: why something rather than nothing. First, we need to ask, what is this "something"? Philosophers have come up with two possible answers.

The first is that there is *no* answer: existence is a brute fact without explanation. Something or other must exist. Not many people like such an answer, but we have to live with it.

The second is that at the "very beginning"—whatever that may mean—something was self-existing. The essence of this something is its own existence. Philosophers and scientists generally favour this second answer, and include among the primordial "something" such things as matter-energy and space-time, natural laws of physics, forms of consciousness, or some general principle or value.

Informed Buddhists, however, would question the basics, like what really is this "something" we are talking about. The moment I point to something, it is gone in space-time. The moment I am aware of a thought, it is gone. So can we really put a finger on any Thing at all? In simple terms, this is the characteristic of not-self, a lack of anything abiding in this space-time continuum.

Buddhists do not deny that the external universe exists, but we have no way of really knowing it, and it would be futile, even dangerous, to do so. We might wryly say that when we try to discuss the external world, we create philosophy; if we try to define the world, we create religious violence. So it is best to leave the external world alone.

However, we can still *know* things. The tools of our knowing—the only ones there are—are our five physical senses and our mind. And all that we can know is what is presented to us by our five physical senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches—and what our mind makes of these senses or "makes sense" of things. [42]

In short, we can only experience our senses, or more exactly, the six senses: the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind. This is *everything*, all that we can know. The Buddhist training is that of properly understanding these tools and wisely using them, so that there comes a point when we are able to "see" beyond these senses directly into true reality. [31]

If we try to do anything more than what our six senses are capable of, we become the veritable blind men (and women) pontificating about an elephant, or rather, that part of an elephant that is at hand.[29] For now, we can only best live in the moment; for that is where we will find true happiness, for now. [35]

23 The Buddha Smile

If popular religion is anything to go by regarding human behavior, we can rightly surmise that most people do not want to think for themselves, and they want quick easy solutions to their problems. They are not even interested in knowing the conditions from which their problems have arisen. If a religion can "solve" their problem (be it a personal issue, an illness, or what have you), it IS the right and true religion. And if it is right and true for me, they think, it must be so for you, too!

If we are Buddhists keeping to the Buddha's Teaching, we would highly value understanding how the mind works. For the mind is the source of all religions and, indeed, all our knowledge and everything

[29] **Nānā Titthiyā Sutta 1** (U 6.4/66-69) = SD 40a.14.

else. Most importantly, by understanding the mind, we can free it from ignorance and suffering—and from all religions. The free mind does not need religion; for it is truly peaceful and wise.

To free the mind, we need to *know* it first. But how do we know our minds? Surely not by looking into any holy book or even any scientific tome—we would not be looking in the right place. The best way to know the mind is to look into it! And the best way to know our mind is to first learn to keep it still and clear.

A still and clear mind is one that is fully and wholesomely aware of the present moment. This is called mindfulness. The first and easiest thing we can be mindful of is our sufferings, shortcomings, even failures. To be mindful is to accept things as they are, especially to accept our pains and failures, just as we are.

For, if we pretend that these negative things do not exist, they will continue to insidiously haunt us. Being mindful of our sufferings will tell us that we can be better persons, that we have not yet realized our true potential, or that at least we should not fall back into the fire. For this reason, Buddhists love dealing with suffering head on.

We often think we do not deserve our sufferings ("Why me?"). If we do, we would not be so much bothered by them. The point is that we should accept our sufferings even though we do not deserve them. This is to show compassion to ourselves. Compassion is to be kind to a person even though he does not deserve it. It is easiest and most important to begin with ourselves. For, if we do not accept ourselves, or worse, hate ourselves, we will end up being either very negatively religious people or violently unreligious people.

Buddhists also know that the Buddha and the great saints have feelings: they feel pain at our greed, hate, pride, stupidity and ignor-

ance. They feel sadness, the ancient texts say,[30] at our unwillingness to learn, at our self-righteous over-confidence, at our self-propelled arrogance. But the Buddha and the saints are not affected by such sadness. This is what allows them to go on teaching and helping others despite everything. This is like a good doctor who is saddened by the pains and loss of his patients, but he keeps on going with a mission. [11]

What have we done that we really deserve any teaching from such wise teachers like the Buddha? But they are compassionate saints. They teach us the Dharma even though we do not deserve it.

One of the unfair demands we often make is: what can Buddhism do for me? A question wrongly put, the Buddha would reply. Rather, we should ask: What can I do for myself? Am I willing to look into my own mind and deal with what is there? Am I able to do this without external props and promises of power and pleasure? Even as I say that I would like to try, I have taken the first step on the Buddhist path.

Despite dealing with suffering head on, the Buddha is naturally happy. As such, Buddhists, too, are naturally happy. The point is that we need to be naturally happy to be able to deal with suffering, whether our own or those of others. That is why we always see a gentle smile on a Buddha image. This is a reminder to smile gently within ourselves no matter what happens outside of us.

This "Buddha smile" keeps our hearts clear of negative states. Try this for yourself. Do the Buddha smile: gently smile inside yourself. Then examine the issue that is troubling you or confront the negative person. You will be surprised at how resourceful and healing your Buddha smile is.

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[30] See "the 3 satipatthanas," Salayatana Vibhanga Sutta (M 137.21-24/3:221) = SD 29.5.

Then we direct our Buddha smile at others, at home, in a class, at work, in a hospital, in a religious place, in public, at anyone we meet. We are beginning to change the world as we know it.

24 Truly Beautiful Mind

How do we live a true quality life? While we can easily and mindlessly get caught up in our routine life or work, one day we might wonder, "What is it all about?" Yet, this is a break that we often let pass without looking through it as a window of opportunity to grow, to change, or to realize some great potential within.

Such a self-doubt, ranging from a mild sense of boredom to a great sense of loss, is called samvega in the Buddhist texts. It means "a sense of urgency." Historically, this is the emotion that prince Siddhattha experiences when he sees the old man, the sick man and the dead man, as the ancient story goes.

"What's the big deal about being young, when we will grow old and decrepit anyway? What is the point of keeping healthy, when we will fall sick in body or mind eventually? What is the point of living, when we will surely die sooner or later?" These are philosophical questions; no wonder we hardly meet any happy philosopher!

But these are more than philosophical questions: they are spiritual questions. They are at the core of our lives, which most of us are either unable or unwilling to face. Prince Siddhattha becomes the Buddha because he goes all the way to find the answer to these 3 Ds (decay, disease and death) of life.

He finds a hint of the answer in the fourth sight, that of the happy, pleasant looking holy man — someone, as it were, untouched by the 3 Ds of life. A profound vision opens up before him, one that is so powerful that he is willing to put aside everything else, including his family, to attain.

For he realizes that he is not alone: all humans, all beings are afflicted. He has gone forth to seek a lasting and complete solution to all these ills, and he has found it. In doing so, he has given up his biological family and embraced the whole human race as his spiritual family. Indeed, he embraces all living beings as his family, as evident from his countless acts of compassion.

The Buddha neither promises heaven for believers, nor consigns unbelievers to hell. Any informed Buddhist knows that the true heaven is our own minds of deep spiritual bliss, and hell is the payback of our own evil thoughts and acts. We create our own heaven and our private hell.

In fact, heaven cannot exist without hell, nor hell without heaven; they are a duality, and they bind those who live dual lives. The Buddha teaches us how to bridge this duality, by treating others as we would treat ourselves. There are really no "I" and "Thou," only reflections of ourselves that we see in "others."

In our social, political and religious insecurity, it is easy for us to try to draw dividing lines of tribal demarcations between "us" and "them." But the Buddha teaches that there is really no "self." There are no enemies: only friends we have not yet made. There are no unbelievers: only people who have not yet understood themselves. There are no sinners: only those who have yet to look deep within to see their godliness. In short, spirituality starts with our unconditional love, of accepting ourselves just as we are, and accepting others just as they are—as a start.

On a higher level, we need to examine how our body-based lives often stunt our mental lives. If we live simply dictated by what we see, what we smell, what we hear, what we taste, and what we touch, we are like moths drawn to an open flame. Like Prometheus, we die with pain, only to repeat the process daily and painfully.

But even Prometheus is eventually released from his rock of suffering, free from having his liver torn out by the eagle every day, only to have it whole again by dawn. We can release ourselves from the night of spiritual dismemberment by occasionally freeing ourselves from our physical faculties, momentarily letting go of all our physical sensing, and simply be truly one with ourselves. That is, by looking deep into our still and clear mind.

When we have fully freed ourselves from our physical selves, we are able to open the door of our breath and enter our inner space as mental beings of supreme bliss. Even if we are unable to enter that breath-door, just standing there and looking into it can profoundly and lastingly energize us so that we return to the world of the senses as masters of our faculties. In short, we are a beautiful mind in a beautiful body.[31]

25 Work

Our work makes our life meaningful. This is of course an idealistic statement because some people might find their work meaningful, but others do not. There are also those who do not think about it at all. The point is we cannot avoid the fact that we need a good honest job to live happily, or live at all.

Suppose we have inherited a huge sum of money so that we do not have to work for the rest of our lives. We might be happy initially, but after a while, boredom will smother us. Then we realize that we need to do something meaningful with what we have. This, too, is work, except that we are independent, working at our own pace, in the way we like.

In one of my counselling cases, a client (a business executive) asked me if he should accept a promotion, with a good raise and other

[31] This last para, as at *Simple Joys 2*, No. 53: p 150.

perks. As a rule, a counsellor never advises his client. A counsellor is like a game referee: he makes sure the game keeps to the rule but does not play the game himself.

So I asked him to go home and carefully list the pros and cons of accepting the promotion and of rejecting it. When we met the following week, he told me he had decided to reject the promotion, as he was already earning enough money, but he valued spending more quality time with his family. I had guessed that would be his answer. But he needed to be responsible for his own decision, as he was the one living with it.

On the other hand, we need not regard quality time as something different from our work. If our work involves other people, we can, if we try, find quality time in it. Making quality time of our work means, firstly, that we are happy with our work.

One simple test to know if we are happy with our work is whether, on waking up, we are able to feel good and look forward to our work. We can make this happen using lovingkindness. On waking up, we should tell ourselves something like "I love this job!" Your mind will take it as, "Let's look at the positive aspects of this job." Rather than wondering if the glass is half-full or half-empty, it is better to fill up the glass.

Often enough co-workers try to make the lives of others in the office or organization miserable. And then the troublemakers themselves complain that they are unhappy with the job! So, secondly, we can make our work more satisfying when the people around us are happy. We begin with such gestures as being the first to greet others, wishing them happy birthday, or simply being a good listener.

Some people tend to send out bad vibrations to others. If this is the case, then the reverse should work, too. So, thirdly, just before falling asleep, as we lie on our bed, visualize our loved ones, work-

place, boss or co-workers in a happy way, accepting them unconditionally with thoughts like "May you be well and happy!" or "I accept you just as you are!" [33]

This positive habit builds and sustains a positive aura around ourselves. Our minds have a way of sending out unspoken sentiments. How we think and feel become us, and affect others in the same way. If we keep up the positive vibrations, others will positively respond to them in time.

If things still do not work out positively, and problems arise, then, instead of blaming others (rightly or wrongly), ask ourselves: "What do I learn from all this?" or "What do I do next?" Such questions answer themselves with amazing results, that is, if we do not force the answers, but let them arise in their own time.

When a negative situation arises, simply take a slow deep breath and then slowly breathe all the negativity out. Do this a couple of times. This is better than raising our voice and blood pressure. As long as we watch our breath and breathe happily, our environment, too, will breathe in a positive way.

Lastly (not the least), let us go to work each time as if it were the first time we are doing so. Be surprised at others in a self-affirming way: if we are in the habit of affirming others, we have already affirmed ourselves.

Our work is best done when we are happy doing it.

26 A Choice Vesak

Vesak day marks the birth, awakening and passing away of the Buddha, the most highly evolved of beings in our universe. We all evolve as a species or a group so that we become better at what we are doing—in our case, as humans. At this point in our evolutionary

history, we have used our common wisdom and abilities to be able to live together in highly complex groups, called society.

This is as far as biological evolution brings us. We have evolved as perhaps the most intelligent and successful group of beings on earth. We can be good at almost anything we put our minds to it. We are highly capable of doing good as well as bad things. We desire pleasure and happiness, and reject pain and suffering.

On a broad level, we can define “good” as what brings pleasure and happiness to us as individuals and as a group (society, country, and world). “Bad” is what brings us pain and suffering. To facilitate our discussion, let us use the word “morality” for all these ideas about good and bad.

There are two kinds of morality: the worldly and the spiritual. Worldly morality is the kind of behaviour we show or put up with because it is right (the law), because it is proper (etiquette), because it is to our advantage (politics), and so on. The difficulty here is that different societies, even different individuals, define this kind of morality in their own way, such as which side of the road to drive on, or how to dress properly for the occasion.

There is a higher kind of morality, the spiritual, which is more of an individual nature. This is the ability to understand and accept the fact that we cannot really be happy all by ourselves when there is suffering around us. Just as we do not like suffering, others too feel the same.

It is for this reason that prince Siddhattha gave up all his worldly happiness and pleasures, his family and status, to seek the truth that would liberate us from suffering. With his awakening as the Buddha, we can say that he did not really give up his family at all. He merely left behind the narrow, biological concept of a family for the broader, unconditional idea of a spiritual family.

This notion of a spiritual family is still seen today in the monastics who keep to the Buddha's teachings. As a rule, they are available to us whenever we need them. In our troubles, we can approach them for spiritual comfort and counselling, which our biological family is unlikely to be disposed to give.

A community of lay Buddhists who, guided by the Buddha Dharma, consistently shows wisdom and compassion, is a spiritual family, too. Such Buddhists, when their lives are touched and moved by the Dharma, are capable of giving spiritual comfort and counselling to anyone who needs it.

In the Buddha's teaching, wisdom is the proper understanding and use of knowledge. We may know a lot of things but we may be selfish with them or do not know how to use them for our happiness and the happiness of others.

Wisdom starts with the willingness to accept ourselves just the way we are, and to accept others just the way they are. In doing this, we are also showing compassion to ourselves and to others. For compassion is being kind to ourselves even when we do not deserve it, to others even when they do not deserve it. (Kindness shown when the other party deserves it is called "gratitude.")

As Buddhists, we choose to see others as mirrors of ourselves. We love life and fear death; so do others. We desire happiness and owning things; so do others. We value pleasure and love; so do others. We need truth; so do others. And our minds must be calm and clear to enjoy all these things. That is why the Buddha recommends that we keep to the five precepts.

Vesak Day is a reminder to us of the Buddha's boundless compassion. He freely taught the liberating truth in an age when religious knowledge was monopolized by a priestly elite. But as Buddhists, anyone can study the suttas, meditate and associate with others.

We often take this for granted, even forget about such basic nature of the Buddha's teachings.

At least once a year, especially on Vesak day, we should get down to the basics and ask ourselves basic questions and answer them in meaningful (not speculative) ways. What is the meaning of life? — Things are never perfect or satisfactory, no matter where you look. What is the purpose of life? — To learn from all this, so that we can find true happiness and liberation.

May you have a choice Vesak.

27 Free Thinking

In the Araṇa Vibhaṅga Sutta (M 139)[32], the Buddha reminds us never to think, "'Only this is right; everything else is wrong.'" He is referring to the point that there are many words for, say, a "pot," depending on the dialect group you are communicating with. Some people might even stretch this Buddha saying to mean that all religions teach the same good thing. However, I don't think any masters or experts of those religions are likely to agree. The point is that every religion, nay, every religious group, thinks it holds the only truth.

On a deeper, yet broader, level, the Buddha saying refers to conditionality, that many causes and conditions work together to bring about many more results and effects. The more time we spend reflecting on this, the better we understand how the world and life works. The more we understand conditionality, the wiser we become, and the closer we are to becoming true individuals.

The contrary of this ability and willingness to see is the tendency to blindly follow the group, to be caught up in the flood churned out

[32] M 139 = SD 7.8.

by the rich, powerful and charismatic. To blindly follow the group is to stop thinking. We become lemmings running over the precipice into the abyss. The well known Chicken Licken story ("the sky is falling"), and its ancestor, the Daddabha Jātaka (J 322), is worth re-reading and re-telling to our children and our children's children.

We all know the sky never falls: there is no "sky" up there, but emptiness. We only call it so. But something does fall on Chicken Licken's head, and on the hare's head in the Jataka. These falling things are still hitting our heads even now. They are called "ideas." The moment we speak with someone, or see or hear something, we are being hit on the head with ideas: "Believe me!" "Join me!" "Buy me!" "Be me!"

The crowd never thinks; only the individual is capable of wholesome thoughts. That is why we see the Buddha sitting alone under the Bodhi tree. Only later, the five monks gathered around the Buddha to benefit from his awakening. The five monks, too, have decided to leave the crowded life, seeking the open freedom of the true Dharma.

When more such awakened people gather together, their minds shine even more brilliantly. It is in this sense that I understand the Chinese saying, "Three cobblers are better than one Zhuge Liang."[33] Even when simple folks learn to think for themselves, together they are often better than a single brilliant mind. That is why even the Buddha respects the noble Sangha of saints.

Many of us are either unwilling or unable to think for ourselves. We are unwilling to think for ourselves out of fear of rocking the boat, lest we would be cast overboard by those stronger than us. But many of us are unable to think mainly because we are blinded by

[33] Zhuge Liang (181-234) was the most brilliant Chinese strategist of his time, and a loyal minister of the Shu Han kingdom during the Three Kingdoms period.

the light of success, wealth, power, status or knowledge, and leashed by the fear of losing them.

We become like Sisyphus, who seems to enjoy pushing the rock up the hill, and when it inevitably runs down the hill again, we happily run after it to push it up all over again. We are mesmerized by the predictability of the rock's motions and by the outcome of our actions. We seem to be in control of the rock![34]

The Sisyphian rock can come in the form of our view of success, wealth, power, status or knowledge, so that we are fixated on it above everything else. We become enslaved to such views or desires so that we are unable or unwilling to allow ourselves to see better ones. We even show others where more rocks can be found to push up more hills. [30]

All these decades of religious learning has taught me one important thing: we need to give up what we have learned sooner or later. I started off my religious life with the religion my brother was converted to, but soon found Buddhism freer and kinder. Then I found Mahayana bigger and better, only to discover that early Buddhism is simply closer to the truth.

As I search the Buddha's teachings, I am amazed at how the suttas keep explaining themselves, one truth leading to another, clarifying one another. The more I let go of things I have learned and ideas I treasured, the clearer and more joyful the truth and reality appear; the more liberated I feel. It is like climbing up a high hill. The air becomes cooler, the vegetation and rocks more beautiful, the land more spacious. And from the peak, the view and vista are unspeakably peaceful and beautiful. Wish you are here.

[34] For a further reflection, see Yodhajiva Sutta (S 42.3) = SD 23.3.

28 Just You Wait

It is winter morning in 2006, and Kate, a young resident doctor, finds herself communicating with an affable young architect, Alex. They communicate by leaving their notes in the magical mail-box of a glass-walled lakehouse that Kate had previously rented from Alex. The problem is that Alex is living exactly two year before, in 2004!

A bond grows between them as they experience various interesting new connections, such as Kate accidentally leaving her copy of Jane Austen's "Persuasion" at the train station two years back, which naturally leads to Alex retrieving it for her. They fall in love across the distance, but soon Kate realizes she is only fooling herself.

Earlier that year, on 14 February (Valentine's day), Kate, sitting in the city plaza, has witnessed a terrible traffic accident and held a young man who died in her arms. Looking back, she realizes that life is too short to wait for what might be. She tells Alex, "Let me let you go," and they stop writing to each other. Frustrated, Alex leaves the lakehouse and moves to the city to be with his brother, Henry.

Kate reconnects with her wealthy but unloving real-life boyfriend, Morgan, and they move into the lakehouse. One day, furious at Morgan's inattention, she walks into the bedroom, and finds under a hollow-sounding floorboard, a small package: her lost book, "Persuasion", that Alex has retrieved for her from the train station. Her thoughts return to Alex.

One unusually warm winter day, Alex and his brother, Henry, leave their office for lunch. When Alex suggests they meet up after work for a beer, Henry reminds him that it is Valentine's Day and that he has plans with his girlfriend. Valentine's Day 2006! Alex rushes off to the lakehouse.

For Kate, it is Valentine's Day 2008, and she and Morgan are at an architect's firm to review renovation plans for an old apartment she wants to buy. After the meeting, Kate notices a drawing hanging on the office wall: it is that of the familiar lakehouse! The architect explains that it was drawn by his brother Alex who was killed in a traffic accident exactly two years ago!

Kate rushes to the lakehouse to write a note for Alex. Don't look for her, she begs him, wait for another two years, and come to the lakehouse instead. She puts the note into the mailbox and raises its flag. But Alex has rushed off to see her at the plaza (in 2006). As he is about to step into the street, he reads Kate's note, begging him to wait for her. He has found Kate's note after all! By remaining right there on the sidewalk, Alex breaks off from the original tragic timeline.

Kate meantime falls on her knees, weeping, desperately clutching the lakehouse mailbox. She must have been too late. Then the mailbox flag slowly lowers: Alex has picked up her note! Soon she sees a car arriving from beyond the high grass and then a figure walking toward her on the gravel path: it is Alex. "You waited!" she cries.

This is my favourite movie[35] in recent times, as I can deeply relate to it. For me, it is not a two-year, but a 20-year, wait. I had been a monk for that long with one main aim: to study the Suttas and effectively transmit them to local Buddhists who badly need Dharma grounding. The best way to do Buddhist work surely would be to firstly be familiar with our own sacred scripture.

At that time (before the 1980s), Buddhist books (not to mention Sutta translations) were very difficult to be found locally. Local Buddhism in English was dominated by foreign missionaries who were

[35] "Lakehouse" (2006) is a romantic drama remake of the Korean movie "Il Mare" (2000). Written by David Auburn and directed by Alejandro Agresti, it starred Keanu Reeves (Alex) and Sandra Bullock (Kate).

understandably focussed on raising funds to run their centres, and were not really capable of solving local Buddhist problems.

So I left for Thailand for monastic training. Due to language difficulties, I decided that it was best to learn some Thai, and then study Buddhism and Pali directly in Thai. After the minimum five-year tutelage, I returned to work in Malaysia and Singapore. Except for a small group of mostly young locals, most other Buddhists showed no interest in the Suttas. They would rather resort to chanting, blessings from the monastics, and a weak and fuzzy Buddhism.

It was difficult to communicate the Suttas to the locals then: it was like Kate writing to Alex, from a distance, separated by time, as it were. It was as if I were living in another time.

A major difficulty was my having to work almost alone as a monk. There were other local monks, but they were themselves just beginning their own training in Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere. The western forest monks of Ajahn Chah's monastery, too, were still under training in Thailand. Once I quipped to Bhante Sujato (from the forest monastic tradition) that I was 20 years too early as a monk. Bhante retorted, "Actually, I was 20 years too late!"

But as I watched the "Lakehouse" movie, the story climax struck a resounding chord in me. Kate tells Alex not to be hasty in meeting her, but to wait until two years later. Alex's life is saved and they live happily ever after.

Those years I have waited to resume my Sutta work in Singapore are now growing deep roots, and the joy and light the Suttas are giving us are attested by the number and regularity of the Sutta students since 2002. In fact, the Sutta Discovery, with its publications and website, is now a global phenomenon.

One movie moment still puzzles me, that is, when Alex remains on the pavement, keeping to Kate's plea that he waits for two years. Alex could have looked left, looked right, then left again, and when it is safe, cross the road to meet his love! Maybe I have a regret now: should I have returned to Singapore earlier?

29 Stories We Live By

You name your God, I name mine. This has been going on since we first wondered why the sun rises, why there are stars in the night sky, why the wind blows and water flows, why we are here, why we die. It was a time long before science and human awakening. When people cannot find the right answers for such things, they tell stories about it.

Some thinkers say that the kind of God that a tribe or group worships reflects their common struggles and hopes, and this story holds them together. But now our various communities throughout the world are becoming more globalized. We keep bumping into one another's Gods.

In our global community, we can see a few interesting reactions to the God stories. Firstly, there are those who claim "my God" is better than yours: they are like selfish children; it is best to leave them alone. One great weakness of such a story-group is that their lives are moulded and guided by differences rather than by similarities. They live in a black-and-white world where "friends" are those who think and live like them; those who are different are "enemies"; those who fit into neither category are "strangers" to be converted, appropriated. There is a lot of measuring of humanity here, as if it were a measurable commodity.

Then, there are some God story tellers who see a commonalty in our need for a higher purpose: it does not really matter which God, they are wont to say. The story matters more than the story-teller,

even the story-maker. Let us walk humbly with our God, they preach. This is a more empowering approach, as it allows every one of us to be truly friendly to everyone else. There is much less measuring of humanity here. The main problem, however, is that there can be a lot of superficiality here, like a nicely packaged box, or one with layers of nice wrappings, but the content is really paltry, or nothing really.

The third group simply says, hey, these are just stories, great stories, but please look for their meanings. Stories may divide us, but their spirit brings our hearts closer together. Let us live by the spirit, what the stories are really trying to tell us. The fact is that we cannot live by stories alone: we must live life as it comes. Stories may be about what the world can be or should be, but life is what things really are. So we need a reality check.

If we are truly honest with ourselves, we are likely to notice that no matter how "perfect" the story we live by may be, the ending is not always what we expect it to be. The thing about stories is that once we know their ending, they become boring; we then forget what the story is really about. Or we invent our own ending to the story; in which case we don't really need the story, after all.

There is something much better than any story, even better than all the stories that can ever be told. That is, to look deep into ourselves. What do we notice? We might notice, if we look deeply enough, that we have a lot of thoughts rushing through our minds—these are our great story tellers.

Our minds are the greatest story tellers. They are often very self-centred story tellers, for the simple reason that our minds are, as a rule, unaware of other minds. If we look even deeper, we will see that our minds or hearts have lives of their own. We really have no control over them, and this is what the stories are about. They are

our attempts at harnessing the wildness and wilderness that are our hearts. The God story seems the best story to do so.

But let us look deeper into ourselves. While our minds differentiate us with our stories, there is something that is intimately "us" from day one, something that runs the same way in all of us, whether we are human, beast, or alien. No matter which universe or multiverse we are in: we breathe, and we all breathe the same way. To breathe is to live, to live is to breathe.

Our perspective of life is inextricably and essentially linked to the way we breathe. The more violent we are, the heavier we tend to breathe. To breathe is also to slow-burn ourselves up, as it were. As such, the more violently we breathe, the faster is the burning, the more violent our lives become.

Even during physical exercise, there comes a time when our breathing flows harmoniously with our bodies. Then body and mind act as one. Yet, there are times when we need to simply sit comfortably still and forget about the body for a while. There is just the breath, getting ever more peaceful. It comes to such a still point, a radiant stillness, that the joy is unspeakable.

Joy is the wellspring of religion: it is the realizing of our true selves. We seem to be just a blink in the vast moonless cloudless night sky, amongst billions of other twinkling stars. What beautiful stars, what blissful space! This is the religion that needs no converts, that can never have followers. For we have come to the journey's joyful end. We're truly home.

30 It's a Joke

As far as I know, only humans joke. It can be taken as a form of acceptable lying, as we often know that a joke is about something untrue. That's why we often retort with "It's a joke, right?" For

example, if I say that Sisyphus enjoys what he's doing — the gods have condemned him to keep rolling a huge round rock up a high hill; the rock rolls downhill once it touches the summit, and he then runs after it, to push it up all over again – you might react, "This is a joke, right!" [27]

Pushing uphill a huge rock that keeps rolling downhill for eternity is really no joke. True. But this is an allegory about what it's like when we are caught up in doing something troublesome, and which is also useless. Or worse, like hurting those whom we love, or even those whom we hate. Such an act is not only useless, but is in fact harmful for both sides. Yet, we seem to enjoy doing it. Otherwise, we are not likely to joke.

Joking is often used by those who want to dominate others or show that they are in charge. For example, if someone asks his boss for a raise, and the boss retorts, "You must be joking!" it's obvious who is in charge here.

In one of my university classes, a tutor once quipped that if we do not know the answer, we can either honestly say, "I will get back to you," or we could joke about it. The second way is of course dishonest, unless we follow up with "I'll get back to you," or honestly admit, "I don't know." But there is a third way: ask if anyone else in the class knows the answer.

Answering a serious question with merely a joke can be a put-down, even an insult, to the questioner (who, after all, could be a future Leonardo, Einstein, or Buddha). Once, at a Buddhism and Science forum I attended, a young student earnestly asked, "According to Buddhism, when does life begin?" The panel of speakers—a scientist monk, a scientist and an engineer—took it as a hot potato, one passing the question to the other. After an awkward unscientific spell of silly laughing, the engineer quipped, "Life begins at 60!" Sadly, then, many of us who have read this have no life yet.

What does the engineer's joke here signify? Why did the other two not answer the legitimate question? Either they know and do not want to answer (then, why have the forum?), or they do not know the answer (then, why have the forum?).

A few monastics have good reason to pepper, even flood, their talks with jokes. One monk was even honest enough to tell his audience why he dour, resorted telling jokes to his audience. He found them regularly unsmiling and depressive, which wouldn't do for a Buddhist audience.

The joking monk took great pains to prescribe that his pathological audience smile at themselves in the toilet mirror the first thing in the mourning (oops, morning). And if that does not work, they should push up their cheeks with their fingertips. We can learn to smile; it's no joke. I think this is compassionately insightful of that monk, that is, to heal the local pathological crowd.

On the other hand, for another dark reason, joking speakers, whether monastic or otherwise, generally attract large crowds, but such occasions often make me blush. (However, I do attend such talks occasionally, perhaps so that others would think that I still have some youthful flush despite my advancing decay. But I joke.) Now, why are joking speakers popular with large crowds?

Remember I mention earlier that joking is a way of subtly showing others that we are in charge? Here, it's clearly about power. Local audiences love a high-wattage speaker who is in charge, who is "powerful." Such speakers are like a blazing fire drawing the audience like moths to them.

However, the moment a member of the audience truly understands what the Dharma speaker is trying to say, he metamorphoses into a beautiful butterfly flitting around a sweet flower. Jokes, like toys, must be left behind in the childhood of our minds. Jokes, like spices,

must be properly and sparingly used if they are to enrich the Dharma dish.

There is another positive side to joking: there *is* something healing about jokes, that is, if we joke about ourselves. When we are right in the midst of a problem, we are usually apprehensive, even devastated, over it. But the law of impermanence does not allow even suffering to sustain itself in the same form for long. So our suffering passes.

We truly begin to let go of our sufferings and take charge of our lives when we are able to joke about ourselves, that is, laugh at our shortcomings and problems; when we are able to look back at a problem, no matter how serious, to talk about it in a matter-of-fact way, and laugh at ourselves. Of course, this is only healthy if we do not bore others with this. For, then, it's no joke!

The more we laugh at ourselves, the more others laugh with us. When we laugh at others, we will soon enough laugh alone. When others laugh at us, smile in return.

31 Ways of Knowing

How do we know things? If we do not speculate too much ("what if...?"), it is easy enough to answer this important question. We know things because we have the five physical senses. We see, we hear, we smell, we taste, and we touch. [22]

The tools of knowing the world are our senses. In Buddhist philosophy, we accept that there is a physical world out there, but our senses can never really know it. We can only know what we see: we call it shapes and colours. We can only know what we hear: we call it sounds and vibrations. We can only know what we smell. We can only know what we taste. We can only know what we touch: hardness, softness; smoothness, roughness; heat, cold.

But this is not the real physical world. When we see, hear, smell, taste, or touch something, we invariably comment on the experience. We only see what we want to see; we only hear what we want to hear; we only feel what we want to feel; and so on. In fact, we only experience the past. It's like when we look at a star: it's not really there. The star is already dead millions of years ago; we only see its light which is fast fading away.

In fact, most of us live mainly in the past. We see something, and without a thought we rummage through our minds for memories of such a sight. If we recall something nice about it, we "like" it; if we link it with a past sad experience, we "dislike" it; if we cannot find a past connection, we ignore it. [19]

For some, life is very simplistic. Based on our past experiences, we react predictably. We are drawn to people and things we like; we reject those we dislike; we ignore those we find no connection with. We react to others predictably in the same three ways: they are "friends" (if we like them), "enemies" (if we dislike them), or "strangers" (if we do not know them).

We might even try to measure our experiences. When we measure the world in a systematic way, we call it science. What are we really measuring? It is not really the physical world, but only our sense-experiences of the world, that we are measuring. We have outgrown that kind of physical science. Now we have quantum physics: the observer is part of what he sees; we are part of what we measure. So we need to look deeper.

Our physical senses, as such, are really biased. They are mostly past-oriented. Even as we read this, our mind is probably trying to find some fault with it, or maybe we already have a few ideas of our own and would be writing to the writer to point them out. Our past is measuring and judging this present thing we are reading. Apply this

to our broader experiences, and we might have some more insight into how we know things.

So it is the mind that is the measurer and the judge of our experiences. Our minds decide what we experience and how we experience them. But if we go merely by our physical senses, we only exist; we are not really alive. For our eyes blind us to what we do not like; our ears are deaf to what we do not wish to hear; our noses numb us; our tongues tastes bland; and our bodies tire us.

According to the Buddha, there is another way of knowing, that is, to feel. Western thinking tends to separate knowing and feeling. The reality is that knowing is closely associated with thinking. Thinking may work well if we want to measure things; but not all things are measurable.

Indeed, the more important things in our lives are not measurable. Happiness, kindness, charity and love, for example, are really immeasurable. They are best when you do not measure them. A measured love is jealousy. A measured kindness is diplomacy.

There is a better way of knowing, that is, to feel. To feel is to know without measure. To feel is to directly know someone or something. To feel is to live in the present, to be connected with what IS right now, right here. If we do this more constantly, we begin to rise above our senses, to a world of joy and peace beyond measure.

If we merely measure what we read here, or worse, judge the writer by these few words, we miss the point of this reflection. If we feel what we read, we are more likely to understand what these words are pointing to. Then we have not measured these words, and we might better know what these words are really about.

32 Moved by the Dharma

The Buddha must be the happiest man in the world when he awakens to the true reality of life. So deep is his joy, it sustains him for 49 days, seven weeks, we are told, meditating in various postures. Anyone who has tried to meditate would know that if we really enjoy our meditation, we feel a profound bliss, which in turn allows us to rise above our body to a sweet bliss of the free heart.

We cannot really know the Buddha's experience of spiritual joy and liberation, unless we are willing to let go of everything we hold dear, at least for the duration of enjoying that blissful freedom of the heart. Poets have sung of such happiness, but as it is only momentary, they invariably fall back into despondency when they fall out of such bliss.

The meditative bliss of the heart as taught by the Buddha is a joy forever. Even the memory of a moment's taste of such a liberated heart is joyful. This is the elusive Muses that the artist, the wonder-worker, tries to invoke for inspiration. To a meditative Buddhist, the Muses are always there inside us, waiting to be wakened from their slumber with a lovingkind kiss. The tale of Sleeping Beauty has a deeper meaning that we have missed.

There are many who study Buddhism without ever rousing the Muses within. They take Buddhism to be another professional subject measured to a degree. Such speakers or workers may speak volumes or do big things, but they only make intelligent sounds and gestures without feeling. The question is, do they feel what they know? We can have a good idea of the answer from the way they react when things do not work out the way they have planned or hoped.

We can never be truly charitable no matter how much we give, except when we give with love; for, then, we give love. Yet, we have

no love unless we love ourselves first before we are able to truly love others. Love is to celebrate that "I am," and on account of that, "You are." The twain must meet.

Only when we can truly love and see ourselves as we love and see others in the same way, can we experience moral virtue. This is the golden rule. Goodness and compassion is being kind to others even when they do not deserve them. Indeed, how are we to judge who deserves kindness or not? Compassion, after all, is kindness shown to others even when they do not deserve it.

To truly know the Dharma is to feel it. Only then we can really see heaven in a wild flower, and a universe in a grain of sand. We cannot really see this joy and vastness out there: we can only feel it in here, in our heart. For to feel is to live things directly, that is, not to see a "self" or an "other." [20]

There is no more "I am," and as such no more "you are," either. There is just this wordless bliss, lost to even the poets, for it is inexpressible, incommunicable. We can only taste it for ourselves. This taste is lost to those who lose themselves in the "other," call it what you like, even with the highest, most sacred names.

It is like trying to understand what I have written here only by the words. This is the sort of communication we will have to feel as we read it. Then, we have to forget what we read, to just feel.

We cannot bring forth blissful music by merely looking at the musical score, even if it is the best there is. We need to feel the music deep within, and raise it into our consciousness. We need to tame it to befriend others so they too can learn to feel their hidden beauty.

Music may begin as measured sounds, but its beauty needs to be liberated from its bars. This beauty is felt in our ears, and freed in our heart. This works just the same for all our other senses. If we do

not feel what we sense, we are only animals, some intelligent, some not. To feel what we sense is to fully live.

To feel what we sense is to experience true beauty. We love beautiful things because, like life, beauty is good in itself. Beauty is the promise of timelessness in a world of measures and impermanence.

For a Buddhist who is all heart – one deep in meditation, one who has been touched by the timeless inner bliss – beauty and life are one and the same.

33 The Greatest Love

Lovingkindness (*mettā*) is the first of four positive emotions, also known as the divine abodes or perfect abidings (*brahma,vihāra*). While the ancient brahmins claim they are the only way to God and heaven, the Buddha brings God and heaven right down to earth, declaring that they can be cultivated in our own hearts. Rather than relying on external deities and promises of heaven, by cultivating the godly qualities of compassion (*karuṇā*), appreciative joy (*muditā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*), we experience godliness and heaven right here and now.

Heaven is not an after-death place where only the chosen or select few can go. It is right here where we are, when our hearts are consistently filled with lovingkindness, so that those around us, too, feel empowered to be their true happy selves. To show lovingkindness is to accept others as they are, like allowing a good seed to grow, giving it all the wholesome conditions so that it will blossom into a fruitful and shady tree.

Lovingkindness is the foundation for these divine qualities, in the sense that we must start with cultivating lovingkindness successfully before proceeding to the other levels of positive emotions. The 5th-century commentator, Buddhaghosa, further explains: Why is

lovingkindness alone spoken of so distinctly? Because it is the foundation of all the four divine abodes;[36] and also on account of its fulfilling all of the wholesome states beginning with giving (Vism 9.124/325).[37]

The divine abodes are said to be "perfect, divine" (*brahma*) because they are the best of emotions and because of their faultless nature. They are the best ways to relate to others. As the High Gods (*brahmā*) are fearless, even so these emotions infuse such godliness in us. There are called "immeasurable" (*appamāṇā, appamaññā*) because they can reach out to immeasurable beings. (DhsA 192-197; Vism 263-270)[38]

The Buddha has both incomparable compassion and supreme wisdom. Everything that a teacher can possibly do, he has done for us. He teaches not only humans, but also gods and beings of other realms. Even animals benefit from his presence.[39] Above all, the Buddha shows us how in this world itself, in this body itself, we can see salvation and liberation.

For, we are as we think. Thinking often uses words without feeling. The Buddha teaches us how to feel, to love, beginning with ourselves. Just as we love ourselves, so should we love others. This is the beginning of a good society as well as a true individual.

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[36] The four are listed in **Saṅgīti Sutta** (D 33.1.11(6)/3:223 f).

[37] On the primacy of lovingkindness, see further **Mettā Bhāvanā Sutta** (It 1.3.7) = SD 30.7 (1.2.1.2).

[38] For a description of the immeasurable or divine abodes with similes, see **Tevijja Sutta** (D 13.76-79/1:251) = SD 1.8. On the divine abodes with the elements, see **Vuṭṭha Vass'āvāsa Sutta** (A 9.11.4/4:375 f) = SD 28.21. On how the divine abodes limit karma, see **Brahma,vihāra Sutta** (A 10.206/5:299) = SD 2.10.

[39] For the reflection on Animals Go To Heaven, see Simple Joys, 2009: 16.1.

In the field of human conflict, those who die for us we call "fallen heroes." Those who defend us and the values that we cherish, and who continue to do so, are called true "living heroes." Buddhaghosa gives a famous parable of the four persons and the bandit.

Once a monk was sitting with someone dear, a neutral person, and a hostile person. A bandit comes along and demands only one of them for a human sacrifice. If the monk is to say, "Take me," he lacks self-love; if he is to say, "Take this or that person," he lacks other-love. But he says, "Let no one die," and he convinces the bandit not to kill. He has the greatest love of all.

In fact, it is harder to live for those we truly love and things we truly cherish. The Buddha does not die for us: he lives for us. No greater love has a man than this, that he lives for us, teaching us that we have the capacity and power to free ourselves from suffering.[40] [25]

34 More Than Words Can Say

Words lie, or, more often, they tell us nothing: they are what we make of them. They are at best merely vehicles for meaning. Words easily distort or hide the truth, and fail to convey our true intentions (perhaps because they are not the right ones?). Often, we say things to "play safe," or to "win friends and influence people," or because we think we are right. But in due time, we realize we have been wrong, so we change our minds. And, of course, we expect the world to change with us, too. So it often seems. Is positive communication possible, then?

Perhaps this hypothetical dialogue might help us work out a helpful answer:

[40] This reflection is based on a section in the essay on **Spiritual friendship: A textual study** = SD 34.18.

Intellectual: Every word has its own meaning. Otherwise, how do we communicate?

Buddhist: We have learned certain words from young, and have agreed on their meanings. We communicate with these convenient and "conventional" terms.

Intellectual: You mean that words do not have their own meanings?

Buddhist: We can fix meanings of words relating to what are sensed physically, that is, things we see, hear, smell, taste or touch. So, we can say words like "light," "sound," "flower," "sweet," and "warmth." But if I were suddenly to say, "Light!" you would not know what I'm talking about. Do I mean brightness, or opposite of heavy, or an action to start a fire? So we must know the context. We need to know what you *mean* by what you have said.

Intellectual: But people do not always say just one word; we speak many words which give the context of our words.

Buddhist: True, but it is not always that we can understand a person when he speaks a lot. Often the forest of words hides the tree of truth. This is because we often create our own contexts, and it is not always immediately clear to the other party.

Intellectual: Are you saying that we cannot really communicate with words?

Buddhist: We can, but to be clearer, we must speak with feeling. In other words, we should not just speak, but we need to communicate. The best way of communicating is to speak with feeling, to speak from the heart.

Intellectual: Ah… feeling! You mean speak emotionally?

Buddhist: No, not at all! Remember you said earlier that every word must have its fixed meaning, but now you need to ask me the meaning of "feeling"!

Intellectual: OK, so what do you mean by "feeling"?

Buddhist: In Buddhist psychology, "feeling" refers to "direct experience." To speak with feeling means to speak in a way that reflects a thing or situation as it really is, as we experience it, as we know it.

Intellectual: But most people do not speak like that. They have a motive, or they simply do not know what they are taking about.

Buddhist: Then we should not take them seriously; that is to say, we should give them space, accept them as they are, with patience, compassion, and wisdom.

Intellectual: If we cannot really mean what we say, or say what we mean, what is the point of talking, then?

Buddhist: Very true! The point is that words do not always have fixed meanings; we often decide their meanings as we speak. That meaning is defined by how we feel, that is, if we speak with good intentions, then the meaning is good.

Intellectual: What if we do not have the right feeling for what needs to be said?

Buddhist: Then, it is better to be silent, with a good intention!

The Araṇa,vibhaṅga Sutta (M 139) records the Buddha's advice on how to prevent conflicts in communication, such as speaking slowly and using language that the audience can understand and appreciate.[41] The truth lies not in the words themselves, but in our *understanding* of what they are able to convey. In this connection, there is a saying by the Buddha recorded in **the Arahanta Sutta** (S verse 62):

[41] M 139/3:230-236 = SD 7.8.

> A monk who has become an arhat
> with influxes[42] destroyed, bearer of the last body,
> might say thus, "I speak," or
> he might say thus, "They speak to me."
> Being skillful, knowing the world's way,
> he would use them only as mere expressions. (S 1.5/1:14)

The arhat, the true saint, uses language without giving rise to conceit or misconceiving words to refer to an abiding self. So we can at least try to use words correctly, speak clearly, with a harmonious mind, and intent on conveying truth and joy.

In **the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta** (D 9), the Buddha says:

> For, Citta, these are merely common names, common expressions, common usages, common designations in the world that the Tathāgata [Thus Come] uses without attachment to them [without misapprehending them].
> (D 9.53/1:202 = SD 7.14)

The thing named is not the thing. The word is not the thing. In reality, there is no thing, only what we think. [45]

35 The "I" of the Storm

The real problem with humans is language [34]. We talk a lot. We often say things that we regret later, or pretend the problem will all go away. Then we make the same mistake all over again. Maybe it's the way we use words. Maybe it's the people who simply misunderstand our words.

The Buddha has a very interesting and important teaching about why we often get into trouble with language. In the Arahanta Sutta

[42] States that bring about rebirth and suffering: sense-desire, desire to be, views, and ignorance.

(S 1.25), the Buddha says that an arhat (a fully liberated saint) may use such words as "I" and "mine," without giving rise to conceit, or misconceiving that there is an eternal self or soul.

Conceit, in Buddhist psychology, is defined as a measuring of ourselves against others. We tend to compare ourselves as "better than others" (superiority conceit), or "worse than others" (inferiority conceit), or "as good as others" (equality conceit). It is very interesting when we compare "conceit" here with the modern psychological concept of "complex."

Conceit is deeply rooted in the wrong view that we have a fixed personality, or an unchanging "self," even a personal soul. This is reflected in such remarks as "I'm like that, I can't change," or "He's always like that," and so on. This also happens when we tend to notice our weaknesses or those of others, and not notice the good sides.

We even go to the extreme of saying things like "He's a saint," or "He's my hero," or even, "I think he's enlightened." The point is that such persons have made us very happy or proud in some way, especially when they agree with what we think. The danger of putting people on a pedestal is that when we change our minds about them, they fall into pieces – such as when we think that they no longer agree with us.

Our self-image, our view of "I," plays some of life's worst tricks on us over and again, often without our ever realizing it. Why is it so difficult to see through the "I" of life's storm?

The first thing we must know is that it is not natural to have a notion of an unchanging "I," or even the conception of an "I" itself. We are taught from birth how to use "I" as against others. Notice how young children do not say, "I want a teddy bear." They tend to use their given name, such as "Bobi wants teddy."

We are taught to refer to ourselves as "I" by our parents and minders. In other words, this is part of our socialization process. We need to communicate with one another. The problem is that we grow up regarding ourselves not just as "Bobi" but as "I" in relation to others.

Vital as pronouns may be for communication, that is what they simply are: merely pronouns. They are verbal signposts pointing this way or that way. The person that such a verbal signpost points to is not a fixed entity, but a changing and evolving being. "I" will change, "I" am impermanent, "I" can evolve into an awakened being when "I" let go of any fixed ideas about the "I," about the self or the other.

Here is a simple exercise to remind ourselves of the true reality that there is no fixed "I" or unchanging self. I have a body. And I *know* that I have a body – this is my mind. On a bigger scale, whatever exists is either physical (like my body) or mental (what I can think of or feel). The body is changing and impermanent; the mind too is changing and impermanent. Physical things, too, change; mental things, too, change.

Everything in this universe changes; it is impermanent. Without change, there is no meaning. Without change, we can know nothing. It is only through change and impermanence that we can know things. (Notice how the words and letters here change, so that we can make sense of them!) If we reflect on this deeply and widely enough, we are on the way to self-awakening.[43] [22]

[43] Further Reading: "I" the nature of identity, SD 19.1.

36 Looking But Not Seeing[44]

We often hardly notice what we are doing, and, even less of what we are thinking. We do not notice how views are being formed in our minds, and how we are blindsided by them. For instance, I may see a tree with green leaves, swaying in the wind, with a crow perched on one of its branches.

However, the view that I form in my mind is only that of a tree with green leaves, swaying in the wind, but I do not see or know that a crow is perched on one of its branches. Very soon, my mind moves on to other matters. It would be unusual for me to stop and think about the view I have formed — even if then the crow flies out of the tree. I may vaguely sense something flying away at the back of my mind, but give it no further consideration.

What has Buddhism to say about this type of unconscious view? Informed Buddhists generally accept that there is *no permanent self*. However, in most cases, even as informed practitioners, we may still be unconscious of this view in the sense that we do not always think about it.

In other words, our views are something that we have thought about from time to time perhaps, but we do not often bring them to mind. We believe that we ourselves and other things are *impermanent*, but, we still do not take enough notice of this fact. We are *insufficiently attentive* to what we see or accept.

It is important to understand this process because, according to Buddhist psychology, being inattentive to impermanence leads to inappropriate and ultimately painful emotional responses of selfishness and attachment. Failing to attend to their impermanence, we

[44] This reflection is based on materials from these recommended readings: **(1) Unconscious View**, SD 31.9; **(2) Saññā**: perception, SD 17.4.

tend to cling to things, forgetful of the futility of such an attitude and its imminent disappointment and despair.

If we do not look deep enough, and often enough, into what *is* going on right now before us, then all we have are "views" of ourselves, of others and of events in and around us. A view is an incomplete picture of reality, a part of which we mistake for the whole.

Two people may be talking about the same thing, yet they may seriously disagree with one another—because they view the matter differently. Another reason for their disagreement might be that they assume that words, or at least the words they are using, have fixed meanings. The problem is that they have fixed the meanings themselves, and in many cases, each person is using the words or ideas with their own private meanings.

The more the two persons claim they are right, the more they would disagree! They are arguing from different premises. The best, even only, way out of such an argument is for them to take a different approach. Each person needs to ask and understand what the other person means by the things he says, and to work on that so that there is a common understanding.

In other words, we have to say what we mean, and mean what we say. But what is the meaning of meaning? On a simple level, "meaning" can be said to be either our intention or view or measure of a thing. While a good level of accuracy certainly helps in the proper understanding and communication of ideas, no matter how well defined words and terms may be, the final interpretation is always in the ear and mind of the listener, that is, depending on *what* we have heard and *how* we have understood it.

The Humpty-Dumpty Rule[45] often applies: we may insist on the

meaning of a word, but it may not always be generally accepted or understood so by others. There is something we can learn about words from this famous anecdote:

> "I don't know what you mean by 'glory'," Alice said.
>
> Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. "Of course you don't—till I tell you. I meant 'there's a nice knock-down argument for you!'"
>
> "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knock-down argument'," Alice objected.
>
> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."
>
> (Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-glass,* 1871: ch. 6)

37 Tikkun Olam

Frankly, I am at a loss as to what to write about this week. Some events of the past week in Singapore have been so traumatic to me that I feel as if every goodness I know has been taken away from me. It was a feeling of complete powerlessness to help anyone, that I would like to turn into a rock somewhere in some high mountains and be at peace all alone there.

Of course I am reminded of the Buddha's "hesitation" immediately after his awakening. How deep the Dharma is, flowing against the

[45] This rule properly means an idiosyncratic or eccentric use of language in which the meaning of particular words is determined by the speaker, but is here more broadly applied.

world. How can beings steeped in craving and ignorance ever understand it, much less want to listen to it? They would rather listen to their handphones, even in a Dharma hall right in the midst of a Dharma talk.

It is said that the High God, Brahma, himself came down and beseeched the Buddha to teach the Dharma because there are those like us who would benefit from it, and who would be lost otherwise. But I am not a Buddha. Yes, I am confident in working for stream-winning in this life itself, but I don't think I am there yet, even though my faith in the Dharma is very strong.

What were so dramatic this week that had spiritually troubled me? Firstly, it was the third time that I had to tell an elderly student not to use his handphone right in the middle of Sutta class. When the gentle and respectful allusions to present moment awareness and the like fell on absent ears, I had to tell him so directly. The problem is that he is not the only one under the handphone's power. Technology is a good servant, but a bad master.

Then, on 29 September 2010, The Straits Times reported that the local high-profile priest who had been in jail for four counts of fund mismanagement had served his sentence, and was now back as the abbot of his temple. In May 2004, it was ruled that he was to serve 10 months for his crimes. On appeal, the term was lessened, and finally, he had to serve only four months.

If we go by the traditional Vinaya rules, if a monastic were to take something not given, he would be like a common thief punished by the authorities: such a monk "becomes defeated, not in communion." (Pārājika 2)[46]. Sadly, no Buddhist authority made any statement on this important matter except for a couple of concerned lay

[46] Vinaya 3:46.

Buddhist leaders, who have since been silenced into political correctness.

What are we to make of all this, as Buddhists, as thinking individuals? What are we to say if such scandals happen again? Or is this the status quo? Perhaps some in-depth ethnographic studies of the distribution of power and wealth, and of people's attitude toward Buddhism today in Singapore, might help us understand the situation better.

The plot thickens. A few nights ago, a "monk" phoned my wife Ratna asking to meet her to "discuss your meditation course." Since she did not know him, she handed over the phone to me. When I asked him how many years (*vassa*) he had been a monk, he replied, "Four years." "Shouldn't you be spending the first five years under the tutelage with a proper teacher?" I asked. "Too complicated," he replied.

He said he wanted me to be his "teacher," but I replied that I only mentor those recommended by other bona fide monks or lay practitioners. Anyway, after some insistence from him, I agreed to meet him the next day at a temple around 4 pm. "Sorry," he said, "I have planned to take the MRT to go around Singapore all afternoon!" He insisted that I looked at his website, which I did, and there was a fund raising project complete with his bank account details for us to send money! Furthermore, it was the midst of the rains-retreat, and monks should not be travelling about.

The responses that I've been describing are what the Buddhist teachings call samvega, a feeling as if the floor has been pulled away from under us. There is a powerful sense that things are really wrong and we are helpless about it (like prince Siddhattha seeing the old man, the sick man, the dead man). Yet, a tiny voice in me whispers that something good must come out of all this (like his seeing the peaceful recluse).

Then it happened. This morning I woke up from a dream in which I was working on a Sutta translation. Just as dreams fade with the morning dew, all I could remember of it afterward was only one word: *tikken* (or *tikkun*). After googling, I found that it is a Hebrew word, meaning something like "repair the world." Then it was all coming back to me, as I remember reading about this some time ago.

The word comes from the phrase "tikkun olam," well known in the Kabbalah, a Jewish mysticism made famous by the 16th-century Isaac Lurnia. Basically, this teaching believes that when the earth was created it was unstable; the early universe (figuratively represented by a crystal or earthen vessel) could not hold God's holy light and it shattered. To put the shards back together again, we need to do good deeds to others. It is similar to the Buddhist "skillful means," one Jewish Buddhist scholar friend told me.

It rings a very clear and joyful bell. In **the Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23)[47], the Buddha declares that we are the world. Our eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind, and what they each sense, and their respective consciousness (or attention) – they are the world: we are the world. In other words, it is best to learn to understand ourselves, to be at peace with ourselves first, so that we can really solve or be a part of the solution of the problems around us.

What better way to repair the world than to prepare and use a comprehensive manual on how to do this. I am again reminded of the urgency of working on the early Buddhist Suttas. The more we understand their message, the less we would be dragged away by the drowning currents of the world. We have safe dry land to stand

[47] SD 7.1.

on, and from here we can send out boats and rafts to reach out to others. Not only should we be life-savers, but most importantly, we need to teach others to swim well, too.

In other words, we should learn to hold no greed nor delusion towards others and the world. Above all, this is really about clearing away our own greed, hate, and delusion.

38 Lovingkindness

May I find the truth that frees me,
what the eye sees not, but the heart feels deeply
Let me not seek what is out there,
for that is what my mind magically conjures
Tricking me to see what I want to see,
seeking joys that bite their own tails

All that I see out there is right here in my heart,
how I see the world out there
Beautiful or ugly, the world
is just the way my heart wants it, just make-up
That I paste like posters on the walls of reality,
but they keep slipping away

The flowers are colourfully fragrant when I look at them,
but is that all?
When I close my eyes, those same flowers
smell even more fragrantly unhindered
A sweetness that no winds of the world
nor anything could blow around or away

As I stand on the cliff's edge,
a cotton canopy of clouds below me stretches endlessly
Above me an empty sky,

as if the world is turned upside down and around
Unmoving I stand, without a step,
lest I fall into the bottomless clouds

Memories rush by, but only the truest are
like fresh drops of gentle rain
Upon a thirsting tongue; what was I running after? Was had been
Will be will become will have but not yet come:
we trust words too much

The trees, the mountains, the clouds,
the sky were not have not will not
They are right here with me, all that is,
not coming not going not staying
The sky-like mountains around smile
as I remain still on their giant shoulders

When the moon rises in that cloudless night sky,
the radiance is everywhere
Coming from the depth of my heart, shining, making me pure light
Shining on all alike, high and low, near and far, seen unseen

Be well all, for all is well in the radiant space within me,
all around, too
To the front, all is well; to the right and behind me, too, all is well
To my left, and above as below, and in the spaces in between,
all is well

39 Close Your Eyes, See Better

Whatever original teachings of the Buddha we can know mostly come from the Pali Suttas and the Chinese Āgamas (the first two volumes of the huge Chinese Tripitaka). This is of course to simplify a complex problem, as scholars would tell us that parts of ancient

passages or teachings can be found in the canons of a number of other Indian Buddhist schools.

Although the Buddha has himself not written down any of his teachings, we can know enough from the Suttas and the Āgamas to reconstruct a good working idea of his teachings. We also have the living experiences and teachings of the forest monks and practitioners of today. Using the discipline and imagination of Buddhist scholarship and what we can learn from other related disciplines, even other religions, we can look ever closer into what really happened in the Buddha's life and teachings.

All this is of course "constructed" from various records and sources, which must be tried and tested with our own practice and meditation. It is like keeping our telescope directed in the right quadrant of the heavens. All we need to do now is to keep the telescope steady as we focus closer onto the heavenly body we wish to study. The final true picture of the Buddha Dharma can only come from the calm clarity of our inner peace. Only when we experience this inner peace can we truly know what the Buddha is talking about, and only then can we become Buddha-like.

Buddhism today is an open forum. Anyone who can talk or click a computer keyboard can express his knowledge of Buddhism. This would of course benefit others who know less. But if we do not go beyond this, it is like spending our time chatting with our travel guide or reading travel guides, and missing the real journey to our destination. The Buddhist journey can only be made on our own, for it is an inward journey to explore inner space.

In our inner journey, there is no one we can trust, no one to trust. For all we have are the mind and the body. Whatever exists is either physical or mental. Either way, everything is impermanent. To exist is to be impermanent. Nothing eternal exists, even if we try to

define it with deep faith or great power (religiously or politically). The point is that we cannot define anything into existence.

If we carefully examine the experiences of the great mystics in religious history, we often hear of how they feel a sense of "abandonment" or "alienation" by the very goodness they believe in or by the very people they are helping. It is as if we are ignored, even discouraged, when we try to do good. Our heart, as it were, is enshrouded in a dark night. Darkness, however, is simply the absence of light.

Let us constantly recall and reflect on the radiant image of the Buddha meditating under the Bodhi tree. Let every tree we see joyfully remind us of the Buddha. This is the epitome of the whole universe, of all being at peace with itself. Despite being abandoned by those very friends who have avowed to serve him, the Buddha continues to shine alone like the sun lighting up the universe. In the night of worldly ignorance, we must be like the full moon reflecting this light in a cloudless sky.

A Christian pastor once privately asked me how he could teach Buddhist meditation to his flock. (He was sadly disappointed that his congregation expected God and the pastor to answer all their prayers, some of which were simply unrealistic, and wondered if meditation could appease their hearts.) I recall the Udumbarikā Sīhanāda Sutta (D 25)[48] where the Buddha replies to such questions in terms of the latter's understanding. Look at Christ crucified, I said, and you might just see that he appears to be in deep meditation. He is poised mid-air spanning earth and heaven, as it were, yet untouched by both, and looking deep inwardly. [14]

In a way, a meditator must "crucify" himself, or rather, leave the self behind. The cross is a powerful reminder for me of the Buddha Dharma. It is a giant "I" cancelled out with a great bar. When this

[48] See SD 1.4.

cross turns, it becomes a Dharma wheel with eight spokes. But when a wheel is really spinning, really working, it appears empty. In spiritual life, we need to empty ourselves of all bodily actions and all thoughts. The more we can do this, the more inner stillness and oneness we feel. In meditation, to feel is to directly experience true reality.

Pearl S Buck, in a brief scene in her classic, “The Good Earth” (1931, ch 14), gives us a dramatic and moving angle of human perception. During the sojourn of Wang Lung and his family in Nanking, he is confronted by a tall, thin, foreign man who hands him a piece of paper. The man has blue eyes, a hairy face and hairy arms, and “a great nose projecting beyond his cheeks like a prow beyond the sides of a ship.” Wang Lung sees characters on that piece of paper that he is unable to read, and a picture of a half-naked dead man “who hung upon a crosspiece of wood.”

Wang Lung is horrified, and later that night, he discusses the bizarre picture with his father, who offers the only plausible explanation reflecting pre-Revolutionary China: “Surely this was a very evil man to be thus hung.” This is a logical surmise for someone who has never seen an image of the Crucifixion, and so can only interpret the image from his own painful experiences. A Western religious icon is seen merely as depicting a gruesome execution.

Sadly, some of the most peaceful sacred moments in spiritual faith become lost in the tyranny of worldliness, wordiness and missionary measuring. There are, for example, those who misconstrue the still Buddha under the Bodhi tree as a figure who rejected the world. In truth, the Buddha's eyes are not closed to the world. He rejects what the eye fools us of the world, so that he truly sees into our hearts. He teaches us to look deep into our own hearts and heal ourselves. Wherever something truly beautiful or deeply sacred is depicted, we can see this profound joy and peace, if we look deep enough. [24]

40 Truly Professional

No one can know our inner space better than we ourselves. It is also unwise to allow any outsider into our inner space. This is like opening up a hidden treasure-house to the public before we even know what these treasures are. It is like letting viruses into our vital systems. A religion that thinks for us is the most virulent of diseases. Our mind — use it or lose it.

The Buddha speaks of **the 7 treasures**, so called because they are more precious to us than anything else on earth or in heaven. These true treasures are: faith, moral virtue, moral shame, moral fear, learning, charity, and wisdom.[49] These are qualities which truly enrich us so that we are no more dependent on any outside things for our true happiness.

Faith here means trusting no one, but to try the fare before buying it, so to speak. People who think they are successful or who dream of success often look for religions that they think will measure up to them. The impoverished try to find something that would enrich them. Yet they very often overlook the most important place to look into, that is, their own hearts.

Choose religion wisely. Some say, "Believe that you may know"; the Buddhists say, "Know that you may believe." Belief-based knowledge, or knowledge-based belief? The choice is so obvious, but often we choose the wrong one, especially when we put our remote control into someone else's hands.

True faith begins with moral virtue, that is, the respect for our body and speech. When we understand and accept that our body, our person, is impermanent, we begin to value it more. We learn to keep it healthy and useful. But there are also other bodies, thinking

[49] SD 2.5.

and talking, like ours. Just as we feel, they too feel. When we talk and communicate with them, we need to do so in a manner that is mutually beneficial.

When we mindfully observe ourselves and others, we see this common attitude. If we have faith in this mutual goodness, there is a greater chance for an inter-faith bond that conduces to personal development. True progress arises from wise faith in ourselves.

Two aspects of moral virtue are especially vital to human society: moral shame and moral fear. Moral shame arises from self-respect, that is, understanding that we are capable of true goodness. Evil or "sin" is what prevents us from seeing or cultivating this inner good. When we are able to see our own inner goodness, we can inspire others to see their own goodness, too. This is the beginning of a good society.

Moral fear is the understanding that actions have consequences according to their nature: good begets good, and evil begets evil. This may not be apparent at first because the evil seem to prosper, and the good suffer. The point is that people commit evil because they are not truly happy. If we are truly happy, we are unlikely to commit evil (unless perhaps we are duped into it by others). We must rejoice in the fact that goodness always triumphs in the end. A healthy society is founded on this wise faith.

Most evil is done by those with little learning or the wrong kind of learning; or, by those who hate or disrespect learning. True learning is about discovering that we are good at something wholesome, and we go on to act with this goodness. Originally, we call this a "profession," that is, an avowal that we love what we profess and have wise faith in it. If we keep on looking with wise faith in ourselves and in goodness, we will find our true profession.

If we take a profession as a wholesome belief in ourselves, or as an enjoyable occupation that we profess, then our hearts will overflow

with charity. The true professional is by definition truly charitable, too. A false professional lacks charity. Charity is more than just being kind to those who deserve it (for, often, this is gratitude). True charity is being kind and generous to others even when they do not deserve it. It drops upon all alike, as it were, like the gentle rain, enriching them into goodness. Such a lifestyle would indeed be difficult if we lack a professing heart.

Wisdom arises when we are able to relate to others as they would to us. Our minds and hearts become more expansive and embracing. The faults that we see in others are very often a reminder of our own, which keep eluding us. The goodness we see in others is telling us that we too can rise to such heights, or even higher. Yet a true individual does not measure himself against others. His heart is unbounded like the sky.

41 Being Present

In the late 1960s, a well known mind scientist, Les Fehmi, did a series of experiments on training the mind to focus in the hope of enhancing the clarity and scope of information processing. After a series of twelve 2-hour sessions, trying out various meditation and related methods, he still failed to obtain any sense of focus.

He resignedly sank back into his chair. Then something miraculous happened. Fortunately, he was still glued to his EEG. The readings began to show that he was in a dramatically relaxed “alpha” state! It was when he gave up on his task (and despite feeling a sense of frustration) that his mind began to relax!

This sounds very familiar to those of us who do Buddhist meditation. It is the art of letting go in the heart. What is it that we need to let go? Beginners in meditation often notice how thoughts begin to fill their minds. They lose focus when they follow these thoughts.

Such thoughts then begin to "proliferate": they explode into countless streams and eddies of mental chatter, making us lose focus. Since these thoughts are mostly from the past, we lose touch with the present. The problem with this is that it dissipates our inner energies in countless ways, trying to think in many directions at the same time.

Sometimes we think of the future: what we are going to do next, for example. And we are eager to just get up and do it. We become restless. These thoughts about the future are also influenced by the past. Our habitual ways of thinking push us in that direction.

We must simply remind ourselves that the future has not yet come. Notice that even when the future has come, we often do something other than what we have planned to do. We might even have forgotten what we have planned! So let us keep our attention in the present, where true reality is—in the breath.

The first step to returning to the present is to accept such thoughts for what they are: as an inseparable part of ourselves. Imagine that they are six young mischievous children or six lively little pets we have. They are simply lovely, and we show them our lovingkindness, and let them play just as they like.

But we are not going to join in their play, nor are we encouraging them in any way. We are going to keep our attention in the present moment, in the breath. Whenever the mind wanders off to one of these six little mischief-makers (one of our six sense-faculties), we gently, patiently but firmly bring it back to the breath.

The more we do this, the more our minds will listen to us. In a sense, this is easier than learning to drive a vehicle, and so much safer! In fact, we are learning to be a skillful inner driver of the heart.

Good meditation teaches us to stay in the present, the real centre of our lives. As our sense of the present becomes more focussed, we find it spilling over into our daily lives and enriching them. We begin to notice the present (and presence) in our daily lives, in our work, in the people we care for, in those we meet.

We are now able to see them just as they are, but more deeply, with as little judgement or narrative as possible, or with none at all. We are able to embrace them, as it were, just as we would accept ourselves. The point is that no one enjoys being mean to others: if we are really happy we would not want to hurt others. We would be more embracing.

How often we see others as if we were still in the past. We judge them based on how we think they were, so that they never are, and never will be. Relationships simply fail this way, even before they can begin. We have to leave our past behind.

Let our fallen leaves be blown away by the gentle breezes of self-acceptance, or let them sink into the ground of our lives to enrich it. Let fresh new leaves grow on our trees, and shade us in mutual joy and safety.

Being present means to see our great potential for goodness. To be present with others means to accept and allow for their great potential for goodness. With this sort of unconditional acceptance of others, we might even be able to change their lives (and ours) for the better forever.

42 Every Thing, Everything

My Buddhist friends and I congratulate and rejoice in the gazetting of the Human Society (Singapore) in November 2010. To all humanists and the non-religious who believe in goodness, peace, and truth, this reflection is dedicated.

42 Every thing, everything

Every thing and everything: what do they mean?

"Thing" is a name we give to a part of the whole, a bit of the universe that we are focussed on for the moment. Actually, it is not really a "thing," but simply a WAY of looking at the universe — and quite an incomplete one at that: seeing only a part of the whole.

Even then, we cannot hold this thing forever in our minds. It is different every moment, even though we may not detect it. Yet it is changing every moment. Otherwise, we cannot make sense of it. Only change makes sense. Only change exists. No change, no existence.

Conversely, whatever exists must change. As such, it is meaningless to speak of an "eternal" being or thing. That is why, if we must hold on to such an idea of something or some thing eternal, the best we can do is to *believe* it. That is, we can never really know such a thing, as it does not really exist. At best, we can say that it exists only in our minds.

But such ideas can be dangerous, especially when others do not see the same delusion that we see. So we call them "unbelievers," and bomb them, or send them to hell, or worse. Anyway, hell is impermanent, too, if it exists. For there is no pain unless there is pleasure: pain, after all, is the absence of pleasure, or arises from non-fulfilment of the desire for pleasure.

The universe itself – everything – is changing. There are two kinds of such universes. The first is an external universe, if you like: the one that we perceive around us, or simply, the physical world. It, too, is changing every moment, every second, every micro-second, every nano-second, etc. This could take forever as it were!

Yet time itself is a concept, that is, our experience of relative change. When we are waiting for someone we love, it could take ages. But when we are spending time with that same wonderful

person, time seems to fly. When we are very young, we keep asking when New Year will come, when we will receive hongbao (packets of cash gifts). At my age (61), I wonder why December keeps coming so fast!

The other kind of universe – everything – is the totality of our experiences, that is, our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind, and their respective sense-objects. This is the universe that we experience, or more correctly, this is the universe we manufacture and project for ourselves. We are the creators of our own worlds. [59]

We have to be careful what we fill this personal universe with: heaven, hell, God, devil, demons, ghosts, desirable objects, hateful things, and on. We give them virtual lives when we believe in them. The problem is that this is a very private and limited company we are keeping.

There is an effective way to not fall into our own existential traps. Take them all to be mind-made, which they really are, anyway. Our five senses feed their respective sense-data to our mind, which is the real boss who makes "sense" of things. And how our minds ("we") make sense of things is mostly the result of how we have thought and lived, that is, our past.

Whatever we perceive at our sense-doors (eye, ear, etc), are measured against our inner database of past experiences. If we think that it has provided us with pleasure in the past, we would desire it again now, and again ad infinitum. If we remember that it has brought us pain in the past, we would reject it now and forever. If we are unable to collate it with any past experience, we simply do not know what to do with it: so we ignore it.

This only reinforces our ignorance, especially when we make no effort to investigate what all these events really are. They are not "things" at all because they are mind-made and they are subject to

time. They are impermanent. This is the best we can and need to know.

When we accept the impermanence of every thing and everything, we begin to see this truth more clearly and more universally. We begin to see "ourselves" as parts of everything else. We are not alone, never alone. We are always a part of the universe. The most wonderful thing about this is that it is a most peaceful and reassuring feeling. [22]

43 To Have Or To Be?

How we speak often reflects how we think. Notice how we tend to think in a certain language, usually our "mother tongue." Hence, our thinking is likely to be coloured by our culture. We think in words, and so we are at their mercy; for words do not always reflect our true feelings. Hence, we often quarrel over words, unaware of or disregarding the true feelings behind the words.

Furthermore, we tend to use words as we understand them. Often the other person does not share the same understanding of our words, simple as they may be. On an even more difficult level, the measure of our words is often dictated by our past (our experiences) and our present (the way we think).

Understandably, we often get into embarrassing situations when we judge someone else merely by their words. We look at only one side of the mountain, and take it to be the whole mountain. On a deeper level, we might not even realize that none of the words and thoughts is really ours. We learned them from somewhere.

Hence, it is meaningful to say we *have* a store of words (vocabulary), ideas and opinions, which, like lenses, allow us to understand or perceive what is being expressed here (or anywhere else).

And words are what we make of them. When words are put together, they can muster ideas that move us or hurt us depending on what we really *are*. If we are observant enough, we might notice over the years how the views we *had* tend to change or grow. This is our inner evolution.

We think we have understood life better now, and we might take a stand about religion or non-religion or science or whatever. It would be interesting if our ideas were photos that we could sequentially store in an album. As the years pass, if we look back at our album of the ideas we *have had*, we can notice how we have changed (or not).

These could be ideas about ourselves, about people, about culture, about demons, about God, about Buddhas, about paradise or hell, about Vipassana, about Zen, about religion, about humanism, etc. It is highly unlikely that we would hold on to such views in the same unchanging way all our life.

The cunning wizard (or, some say, a witch) in our head might keep us as a Rapunzel imprisoned in our tall ivory tower. But as our hair grows, we need to climb down from such dangerous heights to the firm ground of reality. If our minds do not grow, we are stuck in a subhuman plane, or in a heavenly little prison on high.

Animals, pretas, asuras and hell-beings generally have fixed ideas all their lives. By nature, they all have different bodies but the same minds. Wild animals (often even domesticated ones) mostly have fear. Pretas have insatiable hunger for things, having them but never enjoying them. Asuras have a relentless thirst for power and pleasure, and would do anything to have them, but that's about all they are capable of. Hell-beings have nothing but violence and painful sufferings. [13]

Wise humans, on the other hand, can discern between what we *have* and what we *are*. For then we are more open to the Dharma,

and can better understand what it means both to have and to be. It is a great blessing to have power, and be morally strong, too; to have money, and be spiritually rich, too; to have knowledge, and be emotionally mature, too; to have religion, and be emotionally independent, too.

This kind of reflection helps us to better understand the nature of true peace and wisdom. In other words, we see meditation as a true renunciation, as "letting go." We each have a body, and we need to let it go by sitting comfortably and peacefully as we start our meditation.

We have thoughts, ideas, and views: we need to set them free so that we can look directly into our minds. We may have feelings, yet we have not really learned to feel. To truly feel is to see and hear beyond words and thoughts, to taste the true nature of people and things. We have a self, but we need to lose it before we can feel this oneness with the beautiful breath.

To truly feel is to be free of words and thoughts, so that we directly experience our heart's bliss. In meditation, we progress from outer silence into inner stillness. To speak or to think is to allow words and thoughts to intervene, to stand between our heart and bliss.

Meditation, in other words, is where we progressively and effectively let go of what we *have*. For what we have are not really ours: they are at best stepping stones for us to ascend to the heights of joy, wisdom and liberation. It would be such a burden to carry these stones along our inner journey.

What we have is not really ours. When we have fully let go of what we *have*, then we are ready to BE one with our heart, to be blissful and wise. We are then moving towards higher *being*, towards awakening, so that we truly *are*.

44 Prayer Without Words

If all the prayers we humans have made are answered, society as we know it would probably have been destroyed. The main problem here is not just about what we pray for, but that these prayers are done with words. We use words to negotiate with a deity, or bribe our Gods, asking for things to happen or not happen. If sex is the most selfish of human acts, then prayer is the most selfish of human thoughts.

This is not to advocate that praying is bad in itself, or that we have to do away with it. We need to learn to pray the right way. But since there are many ways to pray, let us examine what can be the best way to pray. This is the kind of prayer where no one and nothing (such as animals and the environment) get hurt. Above all, it is not about religion, as religious prayers tend to be self-centred, often materialistic, and, what's more, do not benefit the other party, especially non-believers.

It would generally do a lot of good for us to work on a natural prayer, to use a beautifully simple term. A natural prayer does not need words: it is a prayer without words. No negotiations, no thinking; only feelings, directly touching our hearts and the hearts of others.

Feeling is true to life, engaging with life joyfully and fully. When we are unable to feel, we use words, we play with ideas, we fabricate virtual realities, we create very privately limited worlds of our own. When we go to extremes to limit this mental privatization, it may end up as madness.

The more mentally healthy we are, the more we are able to communicate with others, and in a beneficial way. Ideally, we should communicate with others with our wholesome feelings, but this is not always easy.

That is why we study literature, and religion to some extent: to feel wholesomely. Science measures, and often messes up our lives and the environment. The humanities, such as literature, try to moderate science and its effects on us and our world, and also tries to remind us to enjoy life beyond the material. We prosper when there is this harmonious balance between science and humanity, between head and heart.

Man may be the measure of all things, but this is perhaps because man has forgotten to feel. We might try to measure the occurrences of happiness, but we can never measure happiness itself. For happiness is gone before we know it. But unlike sexual pleasure (which, as a rule, knows no satiation), even a happy memory can elevate us.

And as we mature in body and spirit, it is such memories of happiness that multiply and magnify themselves. We have many happy moments in the past, but we fail to remember them. We would rather keep on owning and collecting our pains. As we grow in wisdom, however, we are more likely to be able to look back in joy at these missed moments of happiness. Then we have indeed seized the moment, without living in the past.

True prayer begins when we stop measuring and harvesting. We are only truly happy when we rise above measuring. For measuring is merely to *have*, but feeling is to *be*. We can only *have* what we measure, but we *are* what we feel.

One important ingredient of true prayer is remembering the goodness and joy that arise in us. We may start with recalling someone showing us kindness or joy. Or, we could recall a random act of kindness which we ourselves have done selflessly. This is better than “counting” our blessings. Why rub against the sharp edges of life when we can heal ourselves with life’s love songs?

Another piece of spice for the dish of true prayer is to be present in beautiful places. These are often our intimate moments with nature

herself: spacious gardens, ancient trees, smiling flowers, flowing streams, dreamy breezes, eternal mists, living rocks and self-forgetting. What self is there, but simply seeing the life-giving green, hearing the call of every creature, smelling the flowers and grass, tasting the cool waters, and feeling nature's embrace?

These are the seeds of joy and peace. Tend to them with our bright open hearts. Weed them of thinking and measuring. Water them with our full and loving attention. Smile at them, but cling not to them. For only in nature's embrace and our breathing spaces do joy and peace freely grow.

As we selflessly enjoy this vision, it turns into a blinding light that is for our inner eye only. Yet, even a sparkle of this inner sun-like radiance is enough to spring sweet joy in us. As we stay with this blissful stillness, time touches us not, and we emerge from it as if we have lived forever.

Only then we are truly blessed and ready to pray for others, that is, to accept people, animals, beings and nature just as they are, to wish them well unconditionally. This is not a prayer for faith (we already abound in it). This is not a prayer to harvest souls (for there is no soul).

Yet, it is with this gentle wordless prayer that we can truly heal ourselves and embrace others without measure, so that they too are able to hear the same joyful stillness and learn to pray without words. [12]

45 To Believe, To Know, To Feel

Unless we are cult followers or seriously narrow-minded, we would notice that no matter what religion we follow, we are in some way often influenced or informed (positively or negatively) by some

other religions. Human communication has reached such a closely interactive level that we need not even leave our homes or computers to know things. Most of us, as a rule, interact with a lot of people, and with many different religions and non-religious systems.

Our first level of communication and experience, and often the most common, is to measure others by how they look, how they sound, how they smell, how they taste (the kind of food they take) and how they feel (in the emotional sense). In other words, we basically rely on our physical senses. Most people who follow a religion or claim to have some kind of life philosophy (or none), do so in this way. This is the way of "belief."

To believe is to judge a book by its cover. Most of us actually do this, since most other people do this, too. This makes us feel part of the crowd, and there is a sense of safety in numbers. The new and the naive might even see a well-dressed person as one who is successful and cultured, or regard a well-robed figure as a holy person of some status.

At this point, it is wise to remember that the early Buddhist monastics clothe themselves very simply so as to be indistinguishable from other religious practitioners. Even the Buddha is not always easily distinguishable from other monks. The Buddha may be a distinguished teacher, but he is not always distinguishable from other saints and non-saints. However, he is easily found out from what he teaches.[50]

Certain kinds of sounds, especially loud rhythmic music, are more likely to hold our attention. And if we like the sound, we tend to like the sound-makers, too. Understandably, some religious groups can be very musical, and very noisy. In fact, the religion of noise has deep roots, going back to the preliterate tribal rituals of Africa, the

[50] See **Dhātu Vibhaṅga Sutta** (M 140/3:237-247) = SD 4.17.

American Indians, and other indigenous tribes. We love noisiness mainly because it enhances one sense and numb the rest, so that we do not have to think so much, if at all.

There are also religious foods and rules regarding eating, religious smells (from flowers, incense, etc.), and religious touches (holding hands during prayer, hugging one another, greeting with holy kisses, etc). Such physically sense-based acts reinforce our link with the group and strengthen group beliefs, and hence perpetuate the group or tribe. In fact, we might call this a tribal religion.

In a tribal religious system, as a rule, there is only one preacher or power-holder, one holy figure or God, and one tribe. This is to ensure the integrity and prosperity, even salvation, of the tribe. As such, the rule is that if you are not with the tribe, you are against the tribe. In the deserts and wildernesses of the world, such a closed system works well, like a herd of wildebeest standing together, pointing the heads of horns outwards against the lurking predators.

According to renowned historian Karl Jaspers, between 800 and 200 BCE, there was a major shift in the great civilizations of the times. The social environment was so fertile as to produce outstanding "paradigmatic personalities" like the Buddha, whose ideas became a foundation for future religious and social thinking. This was the "axial age" (Achsenzeit), when individual thinking was valued more than group thinking.

In India, for example, the Buddha speaks against brahminical priestcraft and teaches the internalization of religion. God, in other words, is not up there or out there, but in here (in our hearts). This is the famous teaching of the divine abodes: the cultivation of lovingkindness, compassion, appreciative joy and equanimity. God is not a power-figure, the excuse for politics, but a love-icon inspiring unconditional love.

Buddhist spirituality begins with the understanding that the workings of the physical senses are our true sources of knowledge. We can only "know" what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch – this is the "all," everything that we could possibly take as evidence for knowing and measuring the world.

But there is something deeper, not of this world. The Buddha, well versed in the ancient meditative systems of his times, went further, in fact, beyond any other yogi before him. Not only did the Buddha transcend the world of physical senses in his meditation, he realized that there is no self or abiding essence in this non-sense-based realm (or anywhere else).

Other great mystics, too, have chanced upon this profound spiritual moment when they feel totally abandoned by all their physical senses. Some call it the dark night of the soul, and feel as if they were abandoned even by their deepest source of succour, God. This feeling of abandonment is the result of projecting our ideas, our minds, onto the pure inner light of reality.

The mystic night is dark when we try to see it with our senses, or try to know it with our minds. Only when the mind is fully free of the physical senses does it really see itself. And what does the mind, or better, the heart, see, looking at itself? Beyond the senses, we have no words to explain this. Perhaps, a figure might help: it is like two huge clear mirrors facing one another.

The Buddha simply feels and enjoys this inner space and radiance just as it is, free from all outer projections. No self, no soul, no God, no race, no country, no religion, no politics, no Heart Sutra, no Buddhism. Just peace, just joy, both one, yet even beyond oneness. He calls it nirvana.

The value of this world is more full and enhanced when we occasionally rise out of it to taste inner stillness. It is easy to believe what we want to believe. We begin to really know when we under-

stand how our senses work, filtered and measured by the mind. And we truly begin to feel, when we look deep into the inner clear light. [34]

46 The Road Less Travelled

The less Dharma we know, the more we are likely to want to change it, trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, as it were. So we end up damaging either the peg or the hole — usually both. When we try to change Dharma to fit our fancies, we are doing this only on account of our weaknesses, not our strengths.

The Buddha reminds us not to turn away, much less disrespect, the Sutta teachings.[51] For the fewer Suttas we know, the more we are likely to take our profession or ideas, or even another religion, as our standard of truth and action.[52] This is not helpful at all because we remain the same self-centred person, while our chance to grow in the Dharma has been weakened or disabled.

The more we see the Dharma (especially in meditation), the more we evolve into a wholesome individual. As we delve deeper into this, we feel a greater joy and stillness, so that we realize that we *are* change itself.

The awakened masters, the arhats, beginning with the Buddha himself, are truly great because they teach us that we need not make the same mistakes that they have made. They are like path-finders who have discovered an ancient highway to a glorious lost city, and have cleared this path for us, so that we can safely journey on it, rather than use the muddy, unsafe and long winding and hilly side-roads.

[51] The Sugata Vinaya Sutta (A 4.260) = SD 1.10(3.5).
[52] See Anāgata,bhaya Sutta 2 (A 5.79) = SD 1.10(3.3).

A road "less travelled" sounds challenging but is not always safe, nor does it always reach the right destination (except perhaps for poets). In all fairness, we might say that in artistic creation, the road less taken might bring freshness and variety in our expression of beauty and truth, but such expressions mostly remain on the sensuous level.

In the spiritual cultivation of our mind, the well beaten path is the safest path. This is like learning the tools of the trade, mastering them, and then using them to refine our senses for seeing directly into true reality.

"Keep to the pasture, bhikshus, the haunt [range] of our forebears.[53] Keeping to your pastures, the haunt of our ancestors, Māra will not descend upon you, Māra will not find you as an object of his consciousness. Bhikshus, it is on account of undertaking wholesome mental states that this merit thus grows."[54]

The true road less taken is that inward journey we keep postponing on account of self-gratifying pursuits. One of our greatest tragedies is to age with over-confidence that we have taken more salt than others have. Taking too much salt is not good for the health, anyway.

The joy of aging is one of recalling our follies wryly, laughing at how we were easily fooled when we were younger. This is the humour of the spirit: to heartily laugh in life in the face. Yet we remain a child at heart, that is, as long as we do not awaken from our self-induced

[53] *Gocare bhikkhave, caratha sake pettike visaye.* Here the Buddha is adapting brahmanical language, referring back to the 4 focusses of mindfulness (*satipaṭṭhāna*), "Do not stray away from the focusses of mindfulness, the way of the Buddhas." *Pettika* means "departed ones," but here refers to the past Buddhas.

[54] Cakka,vatti Sīha,nāda Sutta, D 26.1c/3:58 = SD 36.10.

dream-world. We keep making the same mistakes, becoming more sophisticated at them, better at rationalizing them.

We have still to learn to stop crying, to walk, to sit and to close our eyes. As we learn to walk mindfully, to sit still, and to open our inner eye, we begin to cry less at others' faults and our own. We begin to discover delightful goodness in ourselves, ersthwhile hidden by our loud over-confidence and misknowing.

The Dharma itself is change, and we need not change that understanding. Let's say that early Buddhism is a fresh simple piece of Baroque music or a delightful self-expressive jazz jaunt. As the decades and centuries pass, people interpret and reinterpret such beautiful music, using new musical ideas and new instruments. The fact remains that nothing can replace the original piece in all its freshness and simplicity, and its power to forever delight us.

Even so, nothing can replace the freshness, simplicity and efficacy of the early Buddhist teachings. Later Buddhisms are often chimaeras, burdened with culture, philosophy, triumphalism and tribalism. Their external forms, ritualism and hierarchy, are potent sources for investing charisma upon ourselves in our quest for success and wealth, which is all well when done in good faith and with loving-kindness, but this is not always the case.

If our hearts seek inner peace and clarity, and we wish to put down the burden of culture, philosophy and vanity, then we might as well go back to the unlabelled Buddha and his unbranded teaching. Their efficacy is that they are like the basic notes and theory we need to learn before we can produce good music. The point is that there must come a time when even symphonies, nocturnes and divertimenti — delightful music — tire us, and we crave for simple silence. There is nothing more still and clear than the heart of the early Buddhist saints. We can still walk their paths... for the moment.

47 Real Buddhists Are Countless

While statistics might be helpful for political strategy and planning, or for some triumphalist religious claims, it is well known that numbers do not always reflect reality, especially when we are speaking of moral character and mental states. One of the difficulties is with how we define "religion" or "Buddhism." For spiritual purposes, it is beneficial for us to define Buddhism as an ideal way of working for personal happiness, emotional resilience, and unconditional love.

Personal happiness means a feeling of inner peace despite the troubles and unhappiness around us. This true happiness arises from the understanding that the truth is not "out there," but in here, in our hearts. We define, or can define, what makes us happy (without harming others and nature).

Emotional resilience is the ability to face an issue or problem in a wisely present manner, that is, to be effectively a part of the immediate solution or possible resolution. It is the courage to face up to various challenges to what we hold dear in life, especially our loved ones, livelihood, values and faith. Ideally, a common vision inspires and guides all these.

To be emotionally resilient means that we are ever mindful of what we truly treasure in our lives, and the happiness that comes from this. Simply, this means we make every effort to remember beautiful places, happy events, the goodness of others, and our own capacity for making wise choices. Above all, we know that change is the only certainty, and that time is a good teacher and healer. But we must be a good student, too.

One of the greatest setbacks of a religion is when it cannot really show unconditional love. The God-religions, for example, will only accept you if you believe in "God." It is impossible to make a right choice of God, when even within the same religion, not everyone

believes in how he is defined or undefined. Of course, we can turn to the sweeping notion that God is one and the same. But this is only another kind of God.

The final question is inevitably, "Whose God do you believe in?" True spiritual freedom begins when we realize that we can abstain from God-voting, and so we abstain.

We can safely say that the only religion that actually teaches in true detail what unconditional love is, and how to practise it, is Buddhism—or more specifically, early Buddhism, that is, the Buddha's teachings before sectarianism arose. Anyone from any religion, or with no religion, or uncertain about it, will have no problem with the five Buddhist precepts that teach the value of life, happiness, freedom, truth and mental liberation.

If we speak in realistic terms (not theologically, mythically, symbolically, etc.), we must say that *life* is the most precious thing we have: indeed, we *are* life itself. As we treasure our life, so do others. We all seek some way of sustaining our life. We feel *happy* when we are able to earn a living, to support ourselves, and to be an independent individual. We are even more happy if we have real *freedom*.

Society, however, can only be possible when each of us is willing to sacrifice some of our freedom (such as in obeying the law and respecting others). In other words, freedom here does not mean licence or anarchy, which is likely to deprive us of freedom and other life-affirming values. Yet we can still enjoy a high degree of personal freedom, especially by keeping ourselves physically and mentally healthy. This is where Buddhism can teach us things which no other religion or system can.

Early Buddhism can teach us (meaning anyone willing to learn) to be unconditionally free. What really imprison us are our thoughts, beliefs and gullibility. If we can free ourselves from thoughts for a while on a regular basis (even, say, 5-10 minutes a day), we will be

able to break out of our self-imposed prison of negative emotions, views, and ignorance. As I have said before, this is the greatest prayer: a prayer without words.[55]

In our clear still minds, we will truly see that we are capable of such boundless bliss, that we have no need of religious ideas, philosophizing or mental verbosity. Yet we become truly religious in the spirit. We have learned to truly feel; we are truly in touch with ourselves. When we emerge from this cultivation of unconditional self-acceptance, we are truly free with what good we want to do with our lives, and to blissfully and meaningfully touch the lives of others.

The number of people who see this in Buddhism are growing as fast as there are those who realize they can and want to sort things out for themselves. This is a great way of self-empowerment and unconditional love. Such "Buddhists" are uncountable and cut across all religions and professions. They are not statistics; they are states of fully being.

48 God's Temple Is Within Us

If we truly believe that God is holy, then we should never speak for him. For, God will speak to each of us privately, in our still moments, for our ears only. Each of us is unique, with our special needs; even our mind does not remain the same for a single moment.

The God that we can speak of is a self-made God, one we have created in our own image to convince and convert others with. This is a God of the book, a tribal alter ego, a father-figure. We are simply projecting, consciously or unconsciously, our own desire for power and domination, like a blowfish or a frog blowing itself up, but is only full of air. The language of religious power only speaks for itself.

[55] See Prayer Without Words: Simple Joys 2, No. 44.

We are not sheep to be herded. We are not fish to be netted. We are not fishers of men. We are thinking and loving beings. We can think and feel for ourselves beautifully if we live in a nurturing environment of unconditional love.

We live in a tribe called society, but we live interdependently, each in some viable way interconnected with others. Whatever our faiths or beliefs, we are all capable of goodness and wisdom in proper circumstances. No one, no group, no religion, has the right or ability to shape such an open society.

To those who claim to alone hold God's truth and to be the only path to God, the Buddha simply asks them: Have any of you seen or spoken to—that is, actually and personally met—God? Furthermore, those who claim to speak for God do not themselves show the unconditional love, the great compassion, the boundless joy, and immeasurable peace that define Godliness.

In the Tevijja Sutta (D 13),[56] the Buddha declares that he knows everything there is to know about God and Godliness—like a man who has lived in a town for so long that he is able to tell you at once, when asked, the way around the town. The Buddha then explains in detail how we can actually experience Godliness and touch God, as it were, in our own being. God is not out there, but right here in our heart.

For a while, let us not covet any of the sense-experiences, simply letting all the senses be, not troubling them at all. We sit peacefully, in wordless prayer, watching the gentle flow of our breath. Whenever our attention wanders off, patiently and lovingly we bring it back to the breath. Then there comes a point when we are no more distracted by any of the senses, so that we are blissful like a

[56] See Te,vijja Sutta (D 13/1:235-252) = SD 1.8.

successful merchant who has discharged all his debts and enjoying his profits with his wife.

Let us then reject any idea of anger or ill will so that we are blissful, as if we have completely recovered from an illness, enjoying our meals and strong in body.

We then gently make sure that our mind and body are relaxed and present, with neither sloth nor torpor, so that we feel as if we have been released from bondage, no more a prisoner, safe and sound, with no loss of property.

We then free ourselves from past memories and guilt, and leave the future where it is so that we are not restless. We begin to feel blissful as if we have been released from slavery—we are our own master, not subject to others, free, able to go where we like.

We then show complete faith in ourselves, having no doubt at all in our ability to be calm and blissful, like a man, carrying money and goods, journeying on a road through the wilderness, and who then emerges, safe and sound, with no loss of property.

Now our mind is completely blissful and pure, simply attentive to itself, present and blissful, so that our whole being is filled with zest and joy beyond our bodily limitations. Let our mind enjoy this bliss and stillness for as long as it takes. Then, emerging from it, our heart is utterly calm and clear.

With this calm and clear heart, suffuse our front quarter, with all its beings (not just humans), plants and everything else, with unconditional love. Let our unconditional love pervade that quarter of the universe like the sound of one blowing a conch-shell.

Then we suffuse the right-hand quarter with unconditional love,
to all the beings, plants and everything there.

Then we suffuse the back quarter with unconditional love,
to all the beings, plants and everything there.

Then we suffuse the left-hand quarter with unconditional love,
to all the beings, plants and everything there.

Then we suffuse the quarter above with unconditional love,
to all the beings, plants and everything there.

Then we suffuse the quarter below with our unconditional love,
to all the beings, plants and everything there.

Finally, we suffuse ourselves with unconditional love, too,
so that we continue to be full of unconditional love.

With such unconditional love, we empower ourselves to effectively limit the effects of our bad actions, so that they do not haunt us. The Buddha calls this beautiful experience "living with God" (*brahma,vihāra*) or the divine abode. For, we are the temple of the living God, and his spirit dwells in us. So let us not talk of God, but truly feel him: let us look within.

49 Holiday, Holy Day

At first, there were holy days. In ancient India, this was the full moon and new moon days, and the lunar quarters in between, which were all 7 days apart. This system follows the lunar calendar, and is perhaps the earliest 7-day (hebdomad) system, as old as the Babylonian system. The early Buddhists followed this calendar, as do many traditional Buddhists (especially those in south and south-east Asia) today.

During these holy days, the faithful generally take time off from work or their regular activities, from their occupation and preoccupation, to spend time either alone in some form of religious activity, especially meditation, or congregating before a teacher to listen to the Dharma. On new-moon and full-moon days, monastics would gather in conclave to hear an elder recite their monastic code (the Pāṭimokkha), and renew their monastic vows, as it were.

49 Holiday, holy day

As society became more secularized, especially after the Industrial Revolution (18th-19th centuries), when mass production, productivity and labour became more measured and systematic, the idea of "holiday" assumed a more dominant role. Originally, such days referred to special religious days or "holy days," but they now generally refer to any special day of rest or relaxation, away from work, from school, or worldly activities.

Whether we are religious or not, we generally look forward to holidays, even a single holiday, a break from our regular routine. The more routine our work, the more likely we are to look forward to such a respite. In other words, there are things we *have* to do, and things we *love* to do.

Often enough we work so that we *have* things to support our lives and give us happiness. If we spend our holidays wisely, then we *are* truly happy. Generally, work is about *having,* while holidays and holy days are about truly *being.* It is possible for us both to have and to be, that is, when we enjoy our work as we do our holidays.

At work or at school, we often have to do things we do not like, or of which we are not always mindful: we are then not our true selves. On holidays, we have the chance to simply be our selves. In other words, our holidays should not merely be a break from work or schooling, but it should be a time for self-renewal, self-discovery, even self-liberation.

This means being with *those* who are truly happy and with whom *we* feel really happy, people in whom we see goodness and those who see goodness in us. Besides such positive people, we should enjoy wholesome places, abodes of natural beauty and peace, where we can imbibe such goodness.

When we see such goodness in others or in such places, we are also seeing and building goodness in ourselves. Let us breathe in that goodness, and breathe out that goodness. Let us breathe space into

our being so that our heart grows more still and clear. The still mind is a holy mind, a heart that truly and simply *is*.

Holiness is not in a place or an object or another person or an external being. We have projected holiness onto them. Religion is really feeling: a good religion makes us feel good; a true religion lets us see the truth; a free religion frees us.

True holiness is within ourselves, when we are truly at peace with ourselves, when we forgive ourselves for things done or undone, when we accept ourselves unconditionally, so that here begins our spiritual growth. Then whatever we do, we are at peace with it, because we would not consciously do anything bad or evil. [48]

Even our work can be joyful; when we are not working, too, we are joyful. For, we are living in the present moment, responding naturally and harmoniously to what needs to be done next. Even in the face of failure, we feel a sense of sweet relief that we are able to learn from it, so that we better ourselves in due course.

When we are able to enjoy both our work and our rest, when we enjoy both what we have to do and what we love doing, then we are living a full life. For, then, everyday is a holiday, every day is a holy day. [25]

In the Vatthûpama Sutta (M 7)[57] (on the parable of the cloth), a brahmin invites the Buddha to wash himself pure (or "baptise" himself) in a holy river nearby. The Buddha explains that rivers and water do not wash away our evil or sins. (For if they do, then the fishes and water creatures would be the holiest of beings!) Then the Buddha famously declares:

> For the pure, it is always a holy day!
> For the pure, it is always a precept day!
> For the pure, whose deeds are pure, his vow is always fulfilled.

[57] See SD 28.12.

Wash right here (in the Dharma), brahmin!
Towards all being give safety.
If you speak no falsehood, if you harm no life,
if you do not take the not-given, faithful, free from selfishness—
what need is there to go to Gayā?[58]
Any well is Gayā to you! (M 7.20/1:39) = SD 28.12

Happy Lunar New Year & may all your days be holydays.

50 Secret Relationships

We all have our secret relationships. Maybe it is with someone we regard as our soul-mate, with whom we wish to share our lives. If we are married, or have been married, we are likely to know that people, especially our spouses, partners, or children, are not always predictable. Even with friends or anyone we know, our words have often enough been taken the wrong way.

Or, worse, we try to anticipate others, only to find that they fall short of our expectations. We may try to define a person, to take an emotional snapshot of someone, but that person remains forever indefinable; for his journey is not yet done; nor ours. More often, however, we do not really know how to read people.

We do not always really know what others, even those whom we truly love, are thinking or feeling. If we could do all this, perhaps we would never have any relationship problem, marital strife, or family difficulty. Friendships would not break up. Communications would be happier.

On the other hand, if we think that we "know" others very well, we might, in reality, be manipulative, or be only looking at those

[58] That is, Bodh Gayā (beside the river Niranjana), where the Buddha awakened to Buddhahood, the holiest of Buddhist places.

aspects of people that we choose to look at. The problem here is that we tend to have fixed views of people, and of ourselves, too. We have practically stopped learning about them, or even about ourselves.

Our lives then lack the surprises of others' goodness and genius. The reality is that people change; we change. We might notice such happy surprises (let us leave out the sad ones) during happy occasions, such as family reunions or meeting old friends after a long absence. We might notice that their goodness have matured with age, and it is a great pleasure to be in their company.[59]

A benefit of such an encounter is that we know we can trust such people. We can truly connect with them. In fact, we can learn a lot from such positive people. Such goodness rises above family and blood relations. We have a sense of comfort and joy just by thinking of them. It is towards such people that the Buddha says, "Those we can trust are the best of relatives" (Dh 204).

If we think we "know" people, it is likely that we have some fixed ideas about them, even regarding them as being unchanged or unchangeable, like an antique table or the hills. Yet, all things, especially people, change. The more we are open to people, the more we are likely to notice the positive changes in them, to our joy. This is appreciative joy (*muditā*). Then, our lives are enriched by the goodness of others.

The Buddha speaks of four ways in which we can truly know a person, that is:

(1) through living with a person, we would know his moral virtue (in terms of his actions and speech);

[59] I'm reminded of one of the most beautiful family movies ever made, "On Golden Pond" (1981), starring the elderly Henry Fonda in his final film role.

(2) through dealings with a person, we would know his honesty; (3) in times of trouble, we would know his strength or integrity; and (4) through discussions, we would know his wisdom.

Even then, advises the Buddha, such understanding arises in us only after a long time, if we are consistently attentive, and if we do so with wisdom.[60]

Our most secret relationship is surely with our own views, be they religious views or some life philosophy. Ironically, we can be limited by our knowledge, especially if it prevents us from being really open to others or even truly knowing ourselves. All we can know comes through our five senses. Our minds then piece these sense-experiences together, so that we make "sense" of things. So we think.

We tend to be badly influenced and manipulated by our past, so that we tend to seek a religion or philosophy or life-view that fits our past. Here we have two extremes. One extreme is a system that is so well defined (think of any religious sect or group) that it actually limits our growth and keeps us in the rut of dogma and groupthink.

On the other hand, we might throw out all caution and accept that "anything goes." We are more likely to be overwhelmed by the floods of our own views that we hardly ever see the dry land of wisdom and happiness. We are just too busy thinking, or being right, or trying to please others, so that we have effectively stopped learning. Here again we are limited by what we know or think we know.

If there are such extremes, there must be a middle way. Such a way is not "half-way" between the two extremes: it simply avoids them altogether. The middle way is to watch and learn, from patterns in

[60] See Satta Jatila Sutta (S 1:78 f = U 65 f) = SD 14.11; for further details, see **Ṭhāna Sutta** (A 4.192 = 2:187-190) = SD 14.12.

our actions and speech, how they reflect our minds. We often learn more from our failures—our sufferings—than from our successes.

Even when others are at fault, there is so much we can learn about ourselves, if we examine our role in the situation, how we could have bettered the situation. To blame others is to stop learning. To learn is to understand that such situations arise from no single cause, but from a network of conditions. To be wise is to be present in the moment so that we can influence such conditions in a wholesome way.

If we think that we "cannot change" (for any reason), or that others are "always the same," then we are likely to be fatalists. Or, we might live as if we are ahead of ourselves, in the future (what we want to be, especially when we compare ourselves with others), then we might become a caterpillar trying to "free" itself from its cocoon before its time. We would become deformed butterflies.

The Dharma reminds us to stop thinking for a moment, to suspend the rush, as it were, to simply live the present moment. We need to constantly ask ourselves: what really is going on here, why am I doing this, how can I be truly happy? Such questions are a key that opens the door to our true self, true happiness; or at least to a joyfully surprising side of ourselves.

A life without surprises is a boring cyclic existence. To live in the Dharma, the Buddha's teaching, is to live the middle way, one that is full of pleasant surprises.

51 Listen To Yourself

My love for the Buddha's discourses began when I was an adolescent, seeking to understand the mysteries of the world's religions, extant and extinct. I'm convinced that if anyone has the freedom and willingness to examine the teachings and stories of whatever

religions they encounter, and their hearts seek true happiness, they would surely find early Buddhism so attractive in its simplicity and efficacy.

So I spent 20 years as a Buddhist monk studying the Dharma-Vinaya —the Buddha's teachings and monastic discipline—and Pali, the language of the early Buddhist texts (and a smattering of Sanskrit). Early Buddhism is best read in Pali, but not everyone has a good command of it. English translations of the Pali texts are then the next best choice.

Even after I left the monastic order to work as a full-time lay teacher, my love for the Pali texts grows. In fact, I find myself continuing to translate them for the classes I teach, and giving them away as resources to those who seek learning and teaching materials. It is a great joy to be able to translate the Pali texts, as it keeps me in constant link with the Dharma and meditation, ever surprising me with new and liberating insights into life, human nature and self-knowing.

The greatest gift from my love affair with the early Suttas is the assurance of spiritual awakening in the life itself as a streamwinner (*sotāpanna*), a figurative term for one who has boarded a stress-free boat that safely flows downstream into the ocean of nirvana. This same assurance goes for anyone who is able to turn away from self-doubt, worldly distractions and excuses for not wishing to learn.

See how the world passes, everything is but a moment; flow with it selflessly. You will awaken in this life itself; if not, surely at the end of this sleep and dream we have fallen into.[61] Then we truly awaken to a zestful life of clear vision, like a lost traveller leaving a desert to find a well of cool, clean water, so that we can invite others to come and drink, too.

[61] See eg **(Anicca) Cakkhu Sutta** (S 25.1/3:225) = SD 16.7.

The great thing about being a streamwinner, especially in our own times, is that we need not become monks or nuns. (However, if we really are true Dharma-Vinaya monastics, we would surely travel faster and farther on the path to nirvana.) The Suttas speaks of streamwinners who are kings, teachers, husbands, wives, businessmen and other lay people. In other words, we find our lives in this world itself truly meaningful and purposeful.

The main source of this profound meaning and purpose is that we are truly happy. We are capable of such joy and love that we are incapable of breaking any of the five precepts. We love life and all living beings; we wish that they are rightfully happy; we respect them just as they are, so that they would grow spiritually; we celebrate communicating with others with truth and healing. Above all, we rejoice in keeping our minds and hearts free from intoxication so that we are ever mindful and capable of realizing higher wisdom.

The surprising thing about this is that it does not sound religious at all. We do not need rituals or empowerments for this true awakening. We need not look outside of ourselves for the liberating truth (the truth is *not* out there). All this is because we have overcome self-doubt. This is the best empowerment there is, as it is liberating. It awakens us as true individuals, as emotionally independent beings, who are not defined by others, nor by fear, except the fear of evil. We are filled with unconditional love. The greatest love is not to die for another (we can only do this once), but to *live* for others, loving them as we would love ourselves.

This liberating process begins unassumingly with our simply and joyfully listening to the Buddha's teaching in the Suttas, letting them speak for themselves as they have done for over 2500 years. This is also the best way to guard the Buddha's teaching, that is, by remembering and understanding the Buddha Word. Drop by drop, the water of wisdom fills our pot of attention (cf Dh 121).

52 Let The Dead Bury Their Dead

A turning-point in Buddhist history is when the Buddha-to-be sees the three sights of an old man, a sick man, and a dead man (personifications for life's three ills, the 3 Ds: decay, disease and death), and then he sees a pleasant and peaceful looking holy man. The Buddha-to-be realizes he should leave his world of luxury behind to dedicate all his energies to discovering the cause and end of suffering.

There is a related story in the Christian Bible to this poignant moment in humanity's religious journey, found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Jesus sees a great crowd gathering and gives orders to go to the other side of the sea of Galilee. One of his disciples excuses himself saying that he has to bury his dead father. Jesus' reply to him has often troubled many, "Follow me and let the dead bury their dead." However, if we really open our hearts, these words have great spiritual significance.

We have a choice of how to understand these words. There is a narrow polemical view (that those who do not share our confession, those who do not believe religion in the way we do, are "spiritually dead"; have nothing to do with them). Alternatively, there is a broader spiritual view that applies to everyone, no matter what religion we have or if we have none at all.

We tend to seek what is dead. We sometimes wonder about the dead, about death; we wonder what would happen to us when we die. Thankfully, such thoughts come and go, especially when we are distracted by other things. On a deeper level, we tend to live in the past, so that the present eludes us. How often, when we meet someone, especially someone we do not like, we tend to think of her or him in negative terms – because our minds are fixated on some negative past event. Had we chosen to think of something

happy about this same person, we would not have felt so negative. In short, we need to leave the dead buried.

The Buddha went through a lot to let go of the dead, to look for the true life, and he found it deep in his heart in his self-awakening. In a sense, since he has gone as far as any human could go in giving up everything, including sacrificing countless past lives, to seek the liberating truth, we need not do so much for our own salvation. We only need to look within ourselves for that true inner stillness, living in the present. One great way to do this is to feel the peaceful presence of our beautiful breath, and leave the dead behind us.

On a still deeper level, we need to examine how we think. We tend to see things in a fixed and measured way. Instead of seeing a beautiful flower by the path, we see it standing cut in vase on our table. Or, instead of seeing a running brook or enjoying a glorious sunset, we freeze it into dead pixels in our digital camera.

Much of our lives are made up of what we choose to pay attention to. If we choose to remember those who have hurt us, then we are still controlled by them. Our lives are too brief and too precious to allow the dead to rule us. Instead, we should give this privilege (an exclusive reserve), this vital attention and memories, to those whom we love and care for (including ourselves). We should think and feel for those who really matter to us, and leave the dead behind, just as the Buddha left his palaces and princely life behind.

Above all, we need to leave our dead ideas about ourselves behind. We might feel as if we are helpless as we face life's outrageous misfortunes. Then there are those who reinforce this notion, telling us that we are not good enough, that we need to seek some external agency, such as a deity, prayers, a guru, a fortune-teller, a seance, feng-shui, money, and so on.

Our life is too sacred and fragile to be placed into the hands of any other. We have to take charge of our own life, if we want to be the

one truly living it. The Buddha makes a clear statement that we *can* and *should* take charge of our own life (Dh 160).[62] We begin to take charge of our own life by leaving what is dead buried. Let the past go: it is gone; the future has not yet come.

All that we are, all that we can be, are in the present moment. This present moment is an open window through which we can not only see all the goodness we are capable of, but also act on it. Live the present well, then our past becomes valuable lessons and the future a living reward.

One moment a thought arises, the next it is dead. Thoughts come and go. "Worry" is when we try to hold or to freeze what has to move on. We are still an on-going process. We cannot hold our breaths, not for too long anyway. We live by letting go of every breath so that the next may come. When the final breath comes in its rightful time, we have fully breathed this life. Our debt to life is paid, as it were, so that we are truly at peace (Tha 1002 f).[63] This is called nirvana.

53 The Buddha and Prometheus[64]

In terms of comparative mythology—comparing early Buddhism with Greek mythology—the Buddha who brings liberating knowledge to the world is a Prometheus figure, mankind's fire-bringer and light-giver. In Greek mythology, Prometheus (meaning "fore-

[62] The self is the master of the self, | for, who else could the master be? | with a self that is well-tamed, indeed, | one gains a master that is hard to find. (Dh 160). See **Spiritual friendship: A textual study** = SD 34.1(5.2).

[63] I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life; | I shall cast aside this body fully aware and mindful. || I delight not in death, nor do I delight in life; | I await my time as a servant his wages (Tha 1002 f).

[64] Piya Tan, "The Buddha as Myth," SD 36.2.

thought") is a Titan.[65] Known for his wily intelligence, he is mankind's champion, who steals fire from Zeus and gives it to mortals. (In another story, according to some sources, mankind already has fire, but Zeus takes it away from them.) Prometheus is also said to have taught mankind numerous crafts.[66]

Zeus then punishes him for his fervent protection and patronage of mankind by having him chained to a rock in the Caucasus, while a great eagle tears out and devours his liver. Since Prometheus is a Titan, his liver regenerates, but the eagle comes again the next morning to devour it again, day after day. Prometheus is finally rescued by Heracles, who kills the eagle and unchains him.

Almighty Zeus, in revenge, creates the first woman, the beautiful Pandora ("all-giving") and gives her a special box. On earth, Epimetheus ("afterthought"), Prometheus's slow-witted brother, makes her his wife, forgetting his brother's warning not to accept any gift from the gods. When Pandora's box is opened, every human misery escapes and infests the world, only Hope remaining behind.

Zeus, the high god, is determined to keep mankind in the darkness and deprivation of their ignorance, so that the world remains subservient to the gods, so that "as flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods."[67] Zeus thus plays the role of Māra in early Buddhism, by keeping us from awakening so that we remain subject to his world.

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[65] The Titans, six male and six female, are the "old" god, the offspring of Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven), ie, before the rise of the "new" gods led by Zeus. Cf the rise of Shakra and the 33 gods (*tāvatiṁsa*) by expelling the old gods from that heaven (J 1:202; DhA 1:272-280; cf SnA 484 f).

[66] See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prometheus; also Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology, edd Luke & Monica Roman, Facts-On-File, 2010: Prometheus, Prometheus Bound.

[67] Shakespeare, *King Lear* 4.1.

Actually, it is Epimetheus, Prometheus' foolish brother, who fits the role of Māra better. For the Buddhist Māra is neither as maleficent nor as powerful as Zeus. Even though Māra wields almighty power over the sense-world, he never succeeds in preventing the Buddha in his efforts.[68] Like Epimetheus, Māra lacks wisdom and compassion, and as such can only follow his ignorance and instincts.

Yet, Māra is a high god himself, said to inhabit the Para,nimmitta Vasavatti world: he is even higher than the "Creator Gods," who delights in creating (Nimmāṇa,ratī, "who delight in creation"). So great is Māra's power that he has the fiat to order these powerful gods to do the creating for him! But for such a powerful high god to lack wisdom can be devastating for the world. Like a narcissistic adolescent, he desires everything for himself, to have the entire world under his sway.

The Buddha is beyond Māra's reach because he (the Buddha) has *transcended thought*: he is "Metametheus," as it were. He is controlled neither by forethought nor by afterthought. Even as a god, Prometheus is not really free, but has to work his wiles to outwit Zeus. The Buddha, on the other hand, is beyond the power of any god or God. Furthermore, he is teacher to both the gods and humans (*satthā deva,manussānaṁ*).

Buddhist training begins with the disciplining of our body and speech for the sake of mental development. In other words, we need to examine how our body-based lives often stun, even stunt, our mental lives. If we live simply dictated by what we see, what we smell, what we hear, what we taste, and what we touch, we remain as Māra's subjects. We become moths drawn to the open flame of greed, hate and ignorance. Like Prometheus, we die because of our

[68] See **Māra** = SD 61.8. **Brahma Nimantanika Sutta** (M 49) depicts Māra as having the power even over Mahā Brahmā and his host in their own heaven. The Buddha however sees him out. (M 49/1:326-331) = SD 11.7.

self-made fires, devouring over and again, until our chains are broken.

Prometheus is eventually released from his chains, free from the eagle's daily tearing out his liver, to become whole again. Our night of spiritual dismemberment begins to end when we learn to free ourselves from being dominated by our physical faculties. We are *re-membered*, as it were—we truly become a unified being—by even momentarily rising above our physical sensibilities to more profound joy and peace.

When we have fully freed ourselves from our physical selves, we are able to open the door of our breath and enter our inner space as mental beings of supreme bliss. Even if we are unable to enter that breath-door, just standing there and looking into it can profoundly and lastingly energize us so that we return to the sense-world as masters of our faculties. In short, we are a beautiful mind in a beautiful body.[69] More importantly, as masters of our minds and thoughts, we are forever beyond the power of any god, God, devil, or Māra. For we are buddhas.

54 Emotional Independence or Emotional Alienation?

We have heard this at least once in our lives, when someone, usually angry or frustrated, cries out, saying, "I don't need anyone. I'm capable of being happy by myself." If we said this as a negative reaction, we are likely to fall into emotional alienation, that is, cutting ourselves off from what is good in us, so that we end up privately nursing our wounds and putting up a falsely positive front.

[69] This section, as at *Simple Joys* 2, No. 24 (last para), p 75.

The problem with such a reaction is that we might make summary judgements, tarring everyone else with the same sticky brush. Then we are really alienated, incapable of love, and fearing even to believe in friendship. So we end up as cynics, waiting to point out the next self-prophesized fault or pain episode in ourselves or in anyone.

The universal law of change, however, has a silver lining: everyone changes. We too will change—for the better. Surely, we would rather change for the better, for greater happiness. We can only begin this positive inner change when we have learned not to own pain.[70] This simply means that we should not identify with any pain, that is, by avoiding the use of "I," "me" and "mine" towards a painful experience or memory.

Once the self-healing and growth starts, we build up our emotional independence, too. Simply put, no matter what happens, when we are truly emotionally independent, we are not only able to cope with any situation, but we consistently see a bright rainbow and feel the fresh air enlivening us after the storm clouds have departed.

The path to emotional independence begins with unconditional self-acceptance. We simply need to constantly remind ourselves, "I accept myself just as I am." This is a powerful mantra against those who have been telling us, loudly or tacitly, that we are no good. Or, we can keep telling ourselves, "I'm a lotus leaf standing well above the muddy waters. Rain-drops fall on me but they simply run off." If we have difficulties visualizing, then sit by a lotus or water-lily pond and reflect on this.

The Buddha taught **the five-element meditation** to his own son, Rāhula.[71] The five elements (which are the dynamic states of physical existence) are earth, water, fire, wind and space. These reflect-

[70] See "Don't Own the Pain," Simple Joys 2, No 19.

[71] See **Mahā Rāhul'ovāda Sutta** (M 62.13-17/1:423 f) = SD 3.11.

ions are very simple and effective so that they are a favourite in our children meditation classes.

When we see raw or rich earth ("raw," such as in a farm or on a building site, and "rich," such as the grounds of a vegetable or flower garden), spend a few minutes to reflect on it thus: People throw all kinds of rubbish on the earth, and step all over it; trees and plants grow on it, and so on. The earth does not complain, but compassionately accepts, nourishes and supports all. May I be like the earth, compassionate and supportive of everyone.

The next time we sit by a lake or have a chance to look at a calm sea, reflect on water, thus: Water gives us life, quenches our thirst; we wash and clean ourselves with it, and so on. May I be like water, giving life to others, making them happy, and clearing my mind of all negative thoughts.

Fire is an easy reflection subject. When you notice a flame (say, a candle light) or some bright light, reflect thus: May I be like fire: it gives us warmth, it cooks our food, gives us light, and burns away impurities. May I be like fire, burning away all negative thoughts and memories, putting warmth and light into my life and the lives of those I love and care for. May I bring radiant joy wherever I go.

The wind element can be detected by way of the movement of curtains and mobiles indoors, by the waving leaves and dancing flowers in the open, and by its cool gentle touch. The wind is our breath, our life: May I be like the wind, giving life and comfort to others. May I treasure those whom I love like my own breath; for they breathe, too.

Space fills our bodily cavities: the mouth, the chest, the belly, and we fill the space around us with our own shape, just as it is. Space separates us from those we love, and yet connects us no matter how vast it is. May I be like space, allowing my loved ones, my children, friends, colleagues, and people I meet, to live their lives;

may I fully accept them like the space that embraces them just as they are.

We should choose our favourite reflection and use it as pillow talk, that is, the last thing we silently and joyfully remind ourselves of before we fall asleep. If we wake up in the middle of the night, simply get into this reflection mode. In due course, these happy words would become spontaneous. Oh yes, we will have a lot of sweet dreams, too. Sleep happily, live happily: this is to be truly emotionally independent.

55 Three Things to be Grateful For

In March 2011, our family had a house-meeting, as we occasionally do, to bond as a family. This time my wife, Ratna, suggested that each of us state which three things we are grateful for. There are four of us in the family: Ratna, our two young sons, myself (or, five beings, if we include Tikki, our spirited little tabby who loves watching nature documentaries on TV), when she is not chasing after tom Munchie's tail.

Our 15-year old son Chai Leng gave his three things as: a supporting family, good home-cooked meals, and a good school near to home and with caring teachers. Fourteen-year-old Chai Seng listed the three things he is most grateful for as follows: a comfortable house, a warm family, and his good health (he is becoming the tallest in the family).

Both of them go to a neighbourhood school just across the road, and where Ratna has been the secretary for the Parents' Association for three years running. Chai Leng is doing English Literature, the only one to do so in the school, which does not offer the subject. Every week, on Mondays, Ratna would go to the school for an hour to tutor him, and I would do so every Tuesday morning, tutoring him in Pearl S Buck's *The Good Earth*.

Ratna, in her turn, said that she is most grateful, firstly, for her healthy "hands and feet" to work with, that is, her health. Secondly, she is grateful for our two bright wonderful children. And thirdly, a loving husband who has given her a truly meaningful life. Both Ratna and I are working together as full-time lay Buddhist workers.

The three things I am most grateful for, I told them, beginning with the third one, is our home. Up to 2006, we were living in a rented 3-room HDB flat. As a lay Buddhist worker I earn very much less than an average Singapore priest. As such, I thought that only when our children had started working could we afford our own house, so that we could have a corner-flat for more quiet and privacy, conducive for my Buddhist translation work. Through serendipity and the enthusiasm of family friends, they found for us just the kind of flat we were looking for, and at a good price, too, just before it went up. This is the origin story of Pali House.

The second thing I am grateful for is my loving, patient and hard-working wife, Ratna. When we married, we planned to have at least two children so that they would not be lonely in a nuclear family, and our two children are now well into their adolescence. We dedicate this reflection to them and to all Buddhist parents and their adolescents.

What I am *most* grateful for is, undoubtedly, the Buddha Dharma, which has made all things possible. Firstly, the Buddha has filled my life with meaning (we still need to grow spiritually) and purpose (how to grow in happiness). Secondly, Buddhism is both my profession and vocation, simply put, what I am *trained and experienced* in, and what I *love* doing. Buddhism, as such, is what I *do* and what I *am*. Buddhism is also what we *have*, as our whole family is supported by right livelihood of the lay Buddhist ministry. We have great faith that this would be a working model for future lay Buddhist workership.

Most important of all, for me, is that the work I am doing now, especially the Sutta Discovery translation series, is not just teaching and study notes on early Buddhism. These Dharma-filled suttas give us both the text (authentic foundation for a Buddhist vision) and the context (an effective mission) for Buddhist reform and wholesome Dharma living.

This reflection is about things we should be "grateful" for. "Grateful" here means these precious things are not merely the fruits of our good karma, but also the many wholesome conditions that allow the healthy trees to bear such fruits and to shade us. These trees are the many selfless and Dharma-moved people, such as yourself, who have deep faith in the Three Jewels, and see us as a part of your compassionate vision. In other words, we are all part of this wondrous Dharma work. And for that we are very grateful.

56 What If We Keep On Making The Same Mistake?

This is a fictitious letter put together based on behaviour patterns I have seen and feedback given to me from informants.

Dear O-Lan,

You wrote that you have been helping out in the Om Money Centre, volunteering as a regular cook. One day, when you noticed that the high priest there is playing around with his iPod, you asked why a religious man needed such a gadget. And he retorted, telling you off, "You do not have enough wisdom to understand it. So do not tell me what to do!"

You said that you are deeply hurt and saddened by this. Moreover, there are a lot of other improper things going on at the Centre that clearly break the religious rules. I'm deeply saddened, too, as this is not the first time you have told me such stories. Nor are you the

only one who has done so. Anyway, I hope this reflection written specially for you will perk up your spirit to rise above the situation.

A lot of people might tell you to simply get out of the situation. After all, they might say, if you stayed on, you are the one to be blamed. It is like you keep putting your hand into the fire and then wondering why it keeps hurting.

But we know that the situation is not so simple. Your fiercely pious mother, for example, deeply believes that the high priest there is enlightened and should be shown every respect and obedience. You are not sure about all this, but your filial piety dictates that you should respect the opinions of elders.

You have shared with me, more times than I can remember, your moments of disappointment and despair like this. I cannot say I know how you are suffering because I am not you. But I will keep listening to you and responding as positively as I can so that you know that you are not alone.

Please remember this. Whenever you are in spiritual pain, I am always here with an ear for you. You are not alone. The Buddha's teaching is still with us, and we can be strengthened by turning to the Dharma. We can then recharge and renew ourselves.

I hope that with each time you contact me with such a problem, you develop greater inner peace and wisdom to see the bigger picture. With this, you will have greater strength to rise above and beyond such sources of sufferings. You probably notice, in reviewing yourself, that you are actually much stronger now than before. You have learned to question what you see as wrong. Of course, some more positive changes are needed.

We all have some strong karmic connections from past lives. Maybe you were serving the priest even in past lives, which might explain why you are still loyal to him despite his taking you for granted.

Maybe you feel that your kindness could make him a better person. But it is very much harder in reality to change things.

In your case, let me hazard to say that your constant goodness and compassion have brought such pain upon you. You want to help others, but they are not appreciative of your kindness, and treat you like a common slave. They remain unmoved by your compassion.

Some might say that you are simply facing the fruits of your past karma. But I think the reason for this is that you have chosen to stay on. Our karma might have brought us to where we are, but we can wholesomely changes the situation or get away from it if we choose to.

For me, all this is a powerful lesson in the human spirit. I am amazed at how much compassion and patience you have in continuing to serve those who regularly hurt you. The Buddhist texts have a very moving story of a woman who, within the same day, lost all her family and goes mad. Finally, she meets the Buddha who heals her, and she becomes a wise teacher. With her past painful experiences, she is able to counsel and relieve other suffering women.

Do keep asking yourself, “What is the meaning of all this?” In moments of your inner stillness, look deep into the pattern of things that have been happening to you. In time, you will surely see the wisdom of it all. You must persist in this vision. For you have the stuff of which great saints are made.

The lotus will rise from the mud. For the moment, be like a lotus leaf: let all the world’s evil runs off and out of your mind.

57 Wish I Knew You Better

There is always someone we regret not knowing well enough, and now the person is dead and gone. I knew my parents well enough and grew up under their best care. I was also very close to my paternal grandmother, one of the last full-blooded nyonya in regular dress and conduct, and generosity (as a child, I received more pocket money from her than from anyone else).

I sometimes wonder what my grandfather was like. All I was told was that he was a wealthy man with rubber estates, but lost all his fortune during the Great Depression (late 1930s to 1940s). I was born in 1949, when China became a republic. As I have never met him, I have no memory of him, except for some ideas from hearsay and some old photos.

However, I knew my eldest paternal uncle, TAN Gim Ann, the most educated in the family. The Straits Times (24 Oct 1924:8) says that he was one of those seniors who had passed the Teachers' Normal Examination.[72] Then, he went on to Hong Kong University, where he lived in Eliot Hall. On his return, in due course, he became the founder principal of the Gajah Berang Secondary English School (in Melaka, Malaysia), which he served from 1956 to 1958. My secondary schooling days there (1962-1966) are amongst my happiest memories. That much history of him I know.

My fondest memories of him were of his visiting us in our large rent-controlled baba house in Tengkera Road in Melaka (old Malacca), whose monthly rent he dutifully defrayed. I can still remember the house filled and ringing with the laughter from his jokes and his

[72] http://newspapers.nl.sg/Digitised/Page/straitstimes19241024.1.8.aspx.

gentle teasings of the women in the house, especially making the Boyanese house-maid "latah."[73]

On the net, I found a caricature of him as a dancing scout master in Ong Sek Pek's article in the High School Malacca's website, which attests to his good nature.[74] My mother would bring me along to visit him and his family at his bungalow in Limbongan, facing the sea on the north coast of Melaka. I remember watching him, chest-deep in sea-water, pushing the langai (a local shrimp-net),[75] netting krill-like "gerago" (Malay geragau).

During his HKU years, my uncle met his Hong Kong wife, a Christian convert, who in turn converted him, and they started their own church in Melaka. Once, I remember, she asked me, as she was wont to, whether I believed in God, and I emphatically answered no. She retorted by quoting the Bible which says that only a fool would think so. Religion thus kept us apart, though I remember enjoying the delicious pancakes she would make for us during our visits.

I remember wishing to spend more time with my uncle whenever we visited him, but I never had the courage to speak much with him. One reason, I think, was because I was still a young primary school-boy, unskilled in conversation. A bigger reason was having

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[73] Latah is a startle-induced dissociative reaction, where a surprise gesture or remark could cause the subject to mimic the gesture (echopraxis) or speech (echolalia). See Saṅgārava Sutta (M 100/2:209-213) @ SD 10.9 (3.1). A monograph on this is R L Winzeler, *Latah in Southeast Asia: The History and Ethnography of a Culture-bound Syndrome*, Cambridge Univ Press, 1995: esp chs 5-6: http://books.google.com/books?id=cx6lttz-LAGMC&printsec=frontcover&hl=en#v=onepage&q&f=false.

[74] Caricature of Tan Gim Ann: http://www.malaccahigh.net/ongremembersmhs.pdf: see p 111.

[75] On the langai or langgiang, see http://www.demotix.com/news/393287/shrimp-netting-portuguese-settlement-malacca.

heard that he would cane his students for indiscipline. So to me he was more of a fearsome British-trained cane-wielding school-master than a loving uncle.

Then came a surprise that made me wish I had the courage to have visited him on my own when I was older (in early secondary school). When he died of nose cancer, he remembered me in his will. I was to have whatever books I wanted from his library, the rest of which would be donated to my school library (of which I was then the student chairman). I remember being overjoyed finding a copy of Darwin's "Origin of Species" in his library. My dour aunt, his late wife, with some disapproval said, "Why do you want that book?" My reply: "Well, he read it, you know; now I want to read it."

My uncle has passed on, reborn as someone else or some other being. All I can do now is to remember him with lovingkindness and dedicate the merit of some wholesome deed, like writing this reflection, to him.

To date, I'm not sure how he knew I love books. But I am very grateful that he did, and I miss him all the more. Surely, this would be a more interesting reflection if we had known each other better.

58 The Most Beautiful Sunset

When seasoned travellers meet, one of the things they often like to share is their experience of having watched a beautiful sunset, even of what they regard as the most beautiful sunset. Searching the Net, I notice that I am not alone in claiming that the most beautiful sunset I have watched is the one at Sentosa, Singapore. As the sun is setting, it displays a dazzling natural canvas of bright colours, and as the ruddy ball of day descends low enough on the horizon, its ruddy reflection spans the still waters towards us.

58 The most beautiful sunset

The Buddha throughout Buddhist history is often seen as the sun. The ancient scriptures call him the "kinsman of the sun," linking him to the most ancient race and family of mankind. However, if we look deeper and wider into the texts, we would see this metaphor as representing the fact that the Buddha is spiritual light, the sun that awakens us to a new day.

No matter where in the world we watch the sunset, we are still watching the same sun setting. Only the ambience is different, and each of us might swear that we have watched the greatest sun. And we are all right. We are right because we have watched one of nature's most beautiful events, one that occurs daily, but missed by many.

One of the most beautiful memories we can have is that of having watched a beautiful sunset with our loved one or as a family. It is such a taste that is naturally beautiful that not even the best food from the most expensive high-class restaurant can compare. Not only is this most special experience free, we do *not* need to do anything, but just be there to imbibe it. Indeed, we *must* do nothing in order to fully experience a sunset.

In my childhood days, in Melaka (ancient Malacca), Malaysia, there was a beautiful beach behind our family house, before it was "reclaimed" and built up in the name of human progress. Occasionally, I used to sit on the soft sand and use my outstretched right arm as a kind of theodolite to measure the time it took for the sun to set over the length of the nail of my upped thumb. It took about fifteen minutes.

I would often simply sit there and watch the sun dip down the horizon, leaving in me a profound sense of fullness of a day done. No wonder, I thought, Thomas Gray was inspired to write the most beautiful poem in the English language in the last light of day. "The

curfew tolls the knell of parting day," he begins in the autumn of 1752.

Like Gray, we can see the setting sun as marking the end of day. The Dharma however connects the lines of meaning in our lives so that we can see a sunset as epitomizing nirvana. As the sun sets, so we let our sorrows sink away into the horizon of the past, where it should be. The moments after the sunset would then be the most beautiful in our lives as we sit in peace with ourselves or with our beloved.

A sunset is a good reminder for us that our day, well done or not, is done all the same. Our day of karma shines upon us, or clouds over us, or thunder away in a storm. But our days always must end up done. Blessed are we if we allow the healing night of rest and sleep to take its course, just as even the mighty sun must set.

The sun is setting behind the Buddha, as he sits under the Bodhi tree on Vesak eve. As the darkness arises, Māra and his host descends upon him to distract him from his meditation. The Buddha touches Mother Earth, calling her to witness all his past efforts towards awakening. Beautiful Mother Earth (we call her Gaia today) rises heavenward and wrings her lustrous wet hair, so that the waters come flooding down to wash away all evil. As the sun rises, the Buddha, the Kinsman of the Sun, too, arises in the world.

Happy Vesak!

59 Small Change

To live as a Buddhist is to keep to the three trainings, those of body, mind and spirit. The training begins with our body and speech, how well we communicate with others: this is the basis of moral conduct. We may not be able to change others, but we begin by accepting them as they are: this is the spirit of the five precepts.

On a more difficult level, we need to tame our mind. As we think so we are: if we think we can, we can; if we think we can't, we can't. When we know our mind, we can change ourselves in a wholesome way.

The third training is that of the spirit, meaning the "essence" of things. With properly developed body (physical actions) and speech, and a disciplined mind, we are able to see true reality, things as they really are, which is liberating in the highest sense.

May I be at peace with what I cannot change

Two things we cannot change are the past and others. We cannot change the past because it is gone. Our past may have shaped us, or even still controls us. However, our past is gone, so how can it really control us? What is influencing or controlling us is not really the past, but *how* we think of our past.

Let's say something happened in the past, and we remembered it. How we remembered it (put it together) is deeply influenced by circumstances then, for example, we were much younger or knew much less then.

We are different *now*. The past is gone: it is *now.* We need to accept the present so that we really live a full life. We might not be able to change the past, but we can be at peace with it. To be at peace here means that we no more think negatively about ourselves because of some past memory.

We may not be able to change others, but we can be at peace with our *ideas* of them. Everyone is in some ways shaped by their circumstances. There are really no "persons," only circumstances. We need to give them the benefit of the doubt because we are not them. When we meet or think of such people, we should train ourselves by *feeling*: "I accept you just as you are."

This will help remove negative images and imprints from our mind, and keep it positive. Remember that no one can hurt us as badly as we ourselves can. No one can hurt us, if we do not allow it.

May I have courage to change what I can

We are limited by our beliefs. A belief is what we *think,* put together into *words* in our mind. To believe something is to give supremacy to the "word," whether we really *know* it or not. Our thoughts (*what* we think) and behaviour (acting out *how* we think) depend on our sense-experiences: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching. In other words, this is how we "make sense" of our world.

Our senses *are* our world. The quality of our "world" is *how* we sense things. More often than not we have a "reactive" experience of our world. We tend to be drawn to what reminds us of a past joy; we tend to push away what reminds us (often unconsciously) of a past pain; and we tend to ignore what is not part of our past. [42]

Our life then is an endless loop of causes and effects, a snake painfully eating its own tail. Ours is a predictably limited existence, living in the past, dead to the present. But we can change things, become truly happy, by rising above our ideas of liking and disliking. We begin by unconditionally accepting ourselves: "I accept myself just as I am. I forgive myself."

Nothing happens to us from a single cause (whether a person, a thing, or an idea). Things happen as a result of numerous causes and conditions. No one is to be blamed. This is the beginning of *wisdom,* facing true reality.

May I wisely know the difference

We are liberated by *knowing true reality,* that is, knowing our mind, taming it, and freeing it. Our mind is fed through our physical senses, but it also thinks for itself by creating new and highly imaginative

ideas of its own. To tame the mind is to understand and refine how this idea-making process works.

One simple way of freeing the mind is to understand that our mind is *changing* all the time. An idea is a fixed view of something that is changing. So we need to accept that even our ideas and beliefs are changing. We only need to see how our ideas and beliefs have changed, often dramatically, over the years.

If we accept that our ideas and beliefs must change, then they become steps of mental development. This is truly learning. We can see how science has progressed over the centuries by changing theory after theory. We truly grow if we honestly examine *how* we think, *why* we think that way, and *what* we think about or believe.

Real growth is that of the heart. The heart grows by letting go of the mind: never mind the word. We are limited by the words in our heads, the voice of the past: it is dead and gone. Let it go.

We may not change the world outside, but we can and need to change the world within. We need to understand and accept this difference.

May I
be at peace with what I cannot change,
bravely change what I can, and
wisely know the difference.

60 New Lamps For Old?

Aladdin is one of the best loved fairy tales from "the Book of the 1001 Nights" or "Arabian Nights." Yet, it was not originally part of the collection, but was added to it by a French translator, Antoine Galland, in 1710. Galland himself heard it from an Arab story teller, a Maronite Christian, from Aleppo (Syria's largest city). Aladdin (Ala-ud-din, "nobility of the faith") himself is clearly Chinese, and

"China" is probably ancient Turkestan. (In Pali, Aladdin would be "Ariya," or in Sanskrit, "Arya," meaning "noble.")

In essence, the story goes like this. Aladdin is a playful intelligent boy living with his mother, as his father is dead. An evil magician, pretending to be the brother of his late father, recruits Aladdin to retrieve an old magic oil-lamp from a deep dangerous underground cave.

The magician asks Aladdin to hand over the lamp before pulling him out of the cave. Aladdin intuitively asks to be pulled out first. The angry magician then seals Aladdin in the underground cave and leaves. Aladdin, in his despair, rubs his hands, and unwittingly invokes the genie of the ring (which the magician has earlier lent him). The genie serves the one who wears the ring, and as commanded by Aladdin, transports him out of the cave.

Back home, Aladdin's mother cleans the old lamp, and the lamp genie appears. Aladdin, in his turn, wishes to be fabulously rich, and his wish is granted. In due course, Aladdin marries the princess of the land, Badrul-budur ("full moon of full moons"), and they live in a magical palace that is even grander than the emperor's. The wicked magician, learning of this, tricks the princess into giving him Aladdin's old magic lamp for a shiny new lamp, but a useless one.

The magician commands the genie to transport Aladdin's palace, princess and all, to Maghreb in north Africa, the magician's home. Aladdin, with the help of the ring genie, goes to Maghreb and kills the evil magician. Aladdin's palace is returned to its original place.

The dead magician's brother, even more powerful and evil, seeks to kill Aladdin in revenge. Disguising himself as a woman with special healing powers, she is invited into the palace by the princess. Fortunately, the lamp genie warns Aladdin of this, and Aladdin kills the second evil magician, too. Aladdin, his wife the princess, and his mother all live happily ever after.

Aladdin's story, like any good story, has universally good values, and above all, common sense. Aladdin, of course, is us, unawakened but capable of self-awakening. The evil magician is a *guru* or false teacher, who claims to have our personal interests at heart; but the reality is more sinister. Or, more suitably, the magician represents a false *teaching* that promises us blessings, empowerment, even salvation, without our having to do anything, except surrendering our heart, mind and body over.

The lamp and its genie are our intellect, our "head." If we rely only on our head, we are likely to be drawn to bigger heads, and lose our minds. This is like using science, religion or learning to endorse our mindsets and hang-ups. There is always a guru out there who will happily stroke us with what we want to believe, but we rarely realize the hidden costs until it is too late.

The ring and its genie represent the Buddha's simple but effective teaching, which always comes to our aid when we exert hands-on effort. We might lose the mighty lamp (because it is "out there"), but the ring is always with us, ready to work for us. Now there is the ring of truth.

Aladdin's mother represents *compassion*. She dutifully cleans the lamp but, lacking wisdom, is terrified and confused when the lamp genie appears. Aladdin knows just what to do and benefits everyone by getting the genie to do his biddings.

The princess is our *wisdom*, which, without compassion, is likely to think only of personal profit and vanity (a new lamp for an old one). So the princess gives away the old magic lamp for a shiny, new one, but which is useless. Again, she unwittingly lets in an even more evil magician into their home! Fortunately, Aladdin learns from his past and destroys all the evils in his path, and so lives liberated at home with wisdom and compassion.

Moral of story? Do not trust gurus or magicians, no matter how clever or powerful they are. The more insidious guru or magician is not out there: he is our *mind*. There is really no magic lamp, no genie, out there: they are in our *heart*. There is no magic ring on the finger: the magic ring of truth is *self-effort* in keeping to the simple true teaching of *self-awakening*.

There is more to a good story than what we read or hear: if we listen deeply with our heart, we will hear even more. You have to find out the rest for yourself: just look within. Meanwhile, keep the humble old lamp burning bright. Never change it for anything in the world!

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